University of Alberta

Teacher Planning in a Combined Grade Classroom: A Case Study

by

Marie Caley ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **Teacher Planning in a Combined-Grade Classroom: A Case Study** submitted by Marie Caley in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Abstract

The central purpose of this research was to develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics and demands of teaching in a combined-grade classroom through a case study of one elementary combined-grade teacher in a large urban district. Previous research addressed the beliefs of teachers, administrators, and parents towards combined-grade classrooms, academic achievement, and personal development of students in combined-grade classrooms. However, little research focused on how teachers organized and planned their work in combined-grade classes.

The primary data for this case study of one teacher's practice were collected throughout a four-month period, through participant interviews, through classroom observations, and through stimulated recall sessions. Analysis of the data focused on the types of teacher planning and the factors that influenced planning which were: teacher beliefs, locating appropriate materials, the need for differentiated instruction, building relationships with students and parents, teacher collaboration, principal support, and professional development opportunities. The teacher's practices in a combined-grade classroom differed somewhat from those she used in a single grade classroom: she used a greater variety of instructional strategies, she spent less time on direct instruction, and she used more group-related strategies such as cooperative learning. The teacher believed that combined-grade teaching required more preparation time, more attention to positive classroom relationships, and more extensive and thorough knowledge of curriculum. Varied learning strategies and approaches, additional materials and resources, effective assessment strategies and excellent organizational skills were also an asset. The teacher also found that promoting positive attitudes towards combined grade classes with parents,

students and colleagues was necessary. The teacher expressed concerns about planning instruction in content areas where the curricular expectations were very grade-level specific.

Teachers, administrators, and district personnel need to realize the complexities of teaching in a combined-grade class. They need to consider carefully the requirements for planning and organizing combined-grade classes, including teacher selection, teacher support, class size, information for parents and staff, and curriculum content.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The ‘one-room schoolhouse’ was the most predominant way of delivering education throughout the late 19th century and the early 20th century in North America. In 1918 the one-room schoolhouse represented 70.8% of all public schools in the United States (Miller, 1990). A teacher, usually female, would instruct pupils of a wide range of ages and differentiate her instruction according to the age and development of the students. The 21st century combined grade classroom is, in some ways, similar to the ‘one-room schoolhouse’.

At the present time I work in a large urban school district that has about 1,800 elementary classrooms, of which approximately 25% are combined grades. This number of combined grades was a surprise to me. There are no statistics available from the provincial ministry of education, Alberta Learning, on the number of students in combined grades in the province, and the results from academic achievement tests are reported by grade level, not by class. The large number of students involved in combined grades emphasizes the importance of understanding the experiences of teachers in combined grade classrooms.

A combined grade classroom most often consists of two grade levels. ‘Grade level,’ is considered acceptable performance for children who, for example, range in age from ‘just eight’ to ‘almost nine.’ If 1,000 eight-year-olds were asked to do a particular task, the majority would perform at a particular level. Mandated curricula target this level, and curriculum expectations reinforce the idea that this is the level at which a child should be able to perform. A good metaphor for this approach might be a child climbing a staircase. First the child gets him/herself entirely on step one, and then moves up to step two.

However, the actual achievement levels of students in a single grade may span four or more grade levels. This is true for students in combined grades as well.

> In responding to this diversity, teachers have come to realize that the organization of grades may be countering our efforts to meet the range of educational needs among children. Therefore, we seek new organizations that will assist us in planning for children's unique talents and abilities. (Polatino & Davies, 1994, p. 1)

Goodlad and Anderson (1959) were among the first, in their book *The Elementary Nongraded School*, to document the variability in intellectual, emotional, and physical growth of children. They stated "grouping children homogeneously on the basis of single criterion (age) does not produce a group that is homogeneous to the same degree judged by other criteria" (p. 17). Goodlad (1984) expressed his dismay that even in schools that were combining children of different ages, teachers were continuing to teach them as they would teach a separate grade level. Goodlad and Anderson (1987) found that many teachers with gifted or mentally challenged students in their classes proceeded to teach as though their classes were homogeneous. They stated that these teachers were fooling themselves and cheating their pupils. Steffy (1993) in a primary school position paper for the Kentucky Education System stated that each child's pattern of development was unique. Children of the same age do not grow and develop at the same rate and are not always ready to learn the same skills or concepts at the same time. Therefore, single-grade classes have many of the traits, classroom traditions, and organizational features of a combined grade.

Teachers work within the mandated curricula and attempt to develop strategies to meet each child's needs. In any classroom, whether it is a single grade or a combined grade, there are certain characteristics that contribute to each child's success. Developing a positive environment for learning, establishing an atmosphere of cooperation, encouraging an environment in which individual differences can be recognized and appreciated, and supporting a climate in which students are encouraged to take risks are some of the characteristics that contribute to successful learning for all students (Edelsky, Draper & Smith, 1983).

Over the years, the organization of students in schools appears to have been influenced by resource constraints and demographic conditions. Many elementary schools have at one time or another been faced with the necessity of combining students at more than one grade level into one class. The development of combined grades has been largely due to uneven student populations and administrative convenience, rather than the academic, social, and behavioral needs of the students. Combined grade classrooms are and will continue to be a significant dimension of our education system.

The research literature generally indicates that it is unlikely that the grouping of students alone affects the achievement of students, the instructional practices of teachers, or the attitudes and perceptions of principals, teachers, and parents (Veenman, 1995). A combined grade promotes cognitive and social growth, reduces antisocial behavior, and facilitates the use of research-based developmentally appropriate instructional practices such as active learning and integrated curriculum. The wider range of ages and abilities in a combined grade discourages misleading age/grade expectations and helps teachers focus on students' individual learning needs (Gaustad, 1997).

However, the research literature also indicates that there is a lack of consensus with respect to this educational form. Teachers, administrators, and parents sometimes have difficulty understanding that combined grades and single grades are similar in many ways. They often oppose combined grades (Brown & Martin, 1989; Galluzzo, Cook, Minx, Hoover Neel, Skaggs, & Herrick, 1990; Pratt & Treacy, 1986). Teachers generally object to the additional workload involved in teaching two curricula and to the difficulties of meeting the needs of a range of ages and abilities in students (Brown & Martin, 1989). Parents generally object because they believe that their children, unless they are in the lower grade of the combined grade, will learn less in a combined grade. They believe that the children in the lower grade will hear content from the next grade and maybe learn more, but that children in the higher grade will waste time listening to material they have already been taught (Gaustad, 1997). Administrators generally object because of the additional workload of dealing with parent concerns and the problems of integrating the two grade level curricula to meet achievement standards (Mason & Doepner, 1998).

Studies have suggested that there are teacher and administrative considerations that need to be addressed before organizing a combined grade. Knowledge about the specific teaching strategies used in the combined grade is limited. However, providing resources and professional development to assist combined grade teachers with teaching strategies could help enable them to address the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of students in a combined class (Mason & Burns, 1995; Mason & Doepner, 1998).

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the complexities of one teacher's thinking and planning in a combined grade in order to increase understanding of pedagogical possibilities that are responsive to the unique dynamics and demands of teaching a combined grade. This study took into consideration the context of the teacher's work, including the school staff, students, parents, and administration.

Assumptions

Four assumptions underlie this study. It was assumed that if my experience and the literature verified that teachers have little or no professional training in teaching combined grades and teaching a combined grade means hard work for the teacher, then the planning engaged in by this particular group of teachers would also be distinct from teacher planning in a single grade. This is tied closely to the purpose of the study. It was hoped that the data collected in the course of the study would further substantiate this assumption.

Based on concrete evidence from a large urban district and from Alberta Learning, it appears that the number of combined grades, for various reasons, is increasing in a growing number of school districts. This confirms the importance of the study.

It was assumed that combined grades are more like single-grade classes than they are unlike single-grade classes. The emphasis on learning skills, concepts, processes, and attitudes are the same for all students. Each student in a single grade does not receive the same program; nor do the students in a combined class. Teachers develop their program according to the needs of the children in the class.

It was assumed that principals were able to identify an effective combined-grade teacher. Whether it was true or not, the assumption was necessary for the selection of a teacher participant. To select a teacher for my study, principals were asked to identify teachers in their school who they believed were effective, based on the criteria provided to them.

Research Questions

Combined-grade classrooms are both a rural and an urban phenomenon and are common to both public and separate school districts. In this study, I describe and explain the experience of one combined-grade teacher as she went about planning and implementing the curricula. The research was guided by the following question:

What elements of teacher planning contribute to an effective combined-grade classroom?

Related sub questions were:

1. What belief does an experienced teacher of combined grades hold about teaching and learning?
2. What are the practices of the combined-grade teacher? Are they different from those used by a teacher when she teaches a single grade?
3. What challenges and concerns does this teacher face in a combined grade?
4. What does this teacher identify as useful assistance when teaching a combined grade?
5. What is this teacher's philosophy of education?
6. How does this teacher plan for implementing the Program of Studies?
7. How are the individual students' needs being met?

8. How is learning assessed?

Context of the Researcher

In my capacity as an elementary school principal, I work with teachers, parents, and students. During the past six years I have been directly responsible for the organization of students into classes. Financial concerns, as well as a desire for lower class sizes, have sometimes influenced my decisions. Students do not enter schools in neat and tidy groups of 25, all at the same age or the same grade level. It is a common practice in my district to organize combined grades when the numbers in a classroom are too large or the numbers of students in a particular grade are too small.

I have both taught and organized combined grades and have been involved in the development of a curriculum handbook for combined grades. My involvement in the handbook was minimal. Teachers working in combined grades were asked to participate in focus groups. I participated in three focus groups as an observer. I had received verbal permission from the curriculum consultants at central office who were organizing the groups to record the comments from the teachers because I was interested in working in this area. I wrote a summary of the comments I had recorded and submitted them for the handbook. Encouragement from my school district and two related events in the same year at my school initially kindled my interest in combined grades.

The first event happened in the late spring. We had three new families registered in the school. As a result, the Grade 5 class increased to 32 students, and the Grade 4 class remained at 20. I made the decision to have a combined Grade 5 and 6 class for the following year. Some parents raised the educational 'red flag.' Many meetings were held with angry and concerned parents. They were afraid that their children would not get adequate attention for effective learning. I felt frustrated by the lack of parental understanding about combined grades. Nevertheless, after giving the parents opportunity to provide input on their children's learning needs, we went ahead with this plan. Surveys that were distributed to the parents during the year and at the end of the year indicated that they were satisfied with the teaching and learning in the combined grade.

The second event was the implementation of the new Alberta science curriculum. Five topics were to be taught at each grade level, and each group of grade level topics was distinct and different. Therefore, the combined-grade teacher would have to teach 10 new topics, and this would be very difficult for the teacher. I organized a committee of principals to meet with the deputy minister of education to discuss our concerns, but no solution for the schools was available. Many schools decided to separate the two grade levels in the combined grade for their science classes (a practice which is often referred to as de-splitting). This meant that either a part-time teacher on staff be given more teaching time or another teacher hired. This was not a satisfactory option for small schools with limited resources available and little flexibility.

In subsequent years I have reflected on my experiences and placed my thoughts and intuitions into the context of this research project and the professional literature in the field. I began to consider how educators make sense of combined grades. As a result, I became interested in exploring what actually happens in a combined-grade classroom. In particular, I became interested in the areas of teacher thinking and planning in curriculum, classroom management, organizational strategies for instruction, assessment practices, and learning strategies (e.g., cooperative learning or learning centers).

Significance of the Study

Improved teaching is a requirement for school reform and for successful student learning. With reduced budgets, the number of combined grades has increased in my school district. For a long time, any alternative organization of students and teachers such as combined grades (i.e., those classes with two grade levels) has been a focus of concern and anxiety for parents, teachers, and administrators. Every year a number of parent, administrator, and teacher phone calls to either the schools or the district concerning combined grades are documented.

This study illuminates the nature of combined grades, a phenomenon that is increasingly common in teaching but has received limited in-depth study. Earle (1996) pointed out the need for researchers to understand what is happening in the schools and with teachers in their combined grades. As well, the debate between Mason and Burns (1996) and Veenman (1995) regarding students' achievement in combined grades indicates the importance of understanding the processes that operate in the creation and implementation of the combined grade. Although surveys and questionnaires provide useful information, they are not particularly helpful into giving insight either into why those effects have occurred or not occurred or in explaining the processes involved in creating them. There is a need to provide such insight and understanding by looking at the teaching practices within the combined grade (Russell, Rowe, & Hill, 1998).

This study used a qualitative case study method to describe a combined-grade classroom, what went on in the combined-grade classroom, and what the teacher did to make this combined grade an effective, interesting, and enabling learning environment for her students and for herself as a teacher. The overall goal of this research was to develop a deeper understanding of the fundamental nature of combined grades. The findings could assist teachers, administrators, and parents to understand their past or future involvement with combined grades. Also, the findings of the study could serve as a useful resource to consultants and educators and provide them with direction and recommendations for practice related to combined grades.

This research was significant on a personal level because it has informed my work as a school principal and my work in the school district with other principals and district staff. I am currently the principal of a large elementary school that every year organizes a number of combined grades. As a principal, I recognize that my views on teaching a combined grade have changed as a result of the four months I spent with the teacher in the Grade 1/2 classroom in this study. I believe that my decisions regarding combined grades will be more informed. I hoped also that participating in the study would be affirming for the teacher and would benefit her teaching. I was pleased when, a couple of months after I had finished my research, the teacher sent me an e-mail that said, " I miss you coming into the classroom. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate in the study. I think it improved my teaching." The results of this study have enabled me to assist parents, students, and teachers with their knowledge and attitudes towards combined grades. It was easier for me to organize students into classrooms when parents, students, and teachers felt positive and informed regarding combined grades.

Delimitations

The study did not look at multiage classes where students remain with the teachers for more than one year or where there are at least three grade levels combined. As well, this study is limited to one school with one experienced teacher in a combined grade in the selected school district. An *experienced* teacher for the purpose of the study is defined as a teacher who has taught for more that two years in a combined-grade classroom.

Definition of Terms

Single grade: an organizational structure that groups children of approximately the same age within a span of a year in one class. The single grade is often referred to as *traditional*.

Combined grade: an organizational structure that groups children of two adjacent grade levels in one class. The term *combined grade* is known by various other names that include *combination classes, double classes, split classes, mixed-age classes*, and *vertically grouped classes* (Veenman, 1995). These classes are set within the traditional graded system. Students' grade-level labels, the curriculum, and achievement expectations are retained.

Program of Studies: a document written and mandated by Alberta Learning that contains the curriculum expectations and outcomes for each subject at each grade level.

Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Chapter One has introduced the topic of the study. A number of research questions have been posed. A perspective on combined grades, not typically in the research, of viewing the role of the teacher is stated. Terms have been defined, the context of the researcher has been explained, and the purpose of the study has been declared. Chapter Two first presents an overview of the combined grade literature in the following areas: teacher and administrator beliefs, parent beliefs, student achievement, and student social and personal development, and second presents an overview of the literature in the following areas: types of planning (preplanning, interactive planning, postplanning) and the factors that influence planning (teacher, environment, student). Chapter Three details the design of the research. It examines case study, selection of the case, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter Four explores the context of the research, introduces the school, staff, students, parents, and the key participant, the teacher, her students and a typical day in her class. Chapter Five details the findings of the research. It presents information from the teacher about types of planning, and factors that influence teacher planning. Chapter Six provides a summary of the case study. Chapter Seven states the conclusions and discusses the implications for practice and further research. The references and appendices immediately follow Chapter Seven.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Combined grades have a long history in North America, longer than the single-grade classroom. Many research studies have been devoted to the effects of combined grades. In examining the literature relevant to my topic, I first reviewed the professional literature on combined grades. I then reviewed four areas of combined-grade research: teacher and administrator beliefs, parent beliefs, student achievement, and student social and personal development.

Review of the Professional Literature on Combined Grades

From an administrative point of view, combined grades are an easy and convenient solution of placing odd numbers of students in graded classrooms without increasing the costs to taxpayers. Combined-grade classrooms are educators' attempts to adhere to the graded curriculum and fit with the dominant pattern of single-grade classrooms. The authors of most professional articles on combined grades have examined research studies to develop implications for improving professional practice. Table 1 shows the research cited by each of the authors of the professional articles examined.

Craig and McLellan (1988) recommended that principals and teachers develop philosophical and pedagogical reasons for the organization and use of combined grades. They also recommended that the provincial department of education assume leadership in the development of curriculum, instructional strategies, teaching resources, and inservice training for the combined-grade teachers. They suggested that the class size for combined grades should be smaller, and that teachers should be given opportunities to volunteer for the position. Craig (1991) in another article stated that for effective learning and effective classroom organization children should be organized into small groups at the same grade level.

Table 1

Research Cited in the Professional Articles on Combined Grades

Authors	Cited
Freeman (1984)	Milburn (1981)
Craig & McLellan (1988)	Gajadharsingh (1987) Edmonton Public School Board Department of Research (1979)
Bush (1989)	Spratt (1986) Milburn (1981)
Siler & Hayden (1989)	Goodlad & Anderson (1963) Milburn (1981) Pratt (1983)
Craig (1991)	Goodlad & Anderson (1989) Milburn (1981)
Mulcahy (1993)	Miller (1990) Gajadharsingh (1987)
Walser (1998)	Pavan (1992) Veenman (1995) Miller (1996)
Naylor (2000)	Gayfer (1991) Gomolchuk & Piland (1995) Veenman (1995)

Freeman (1984) discussed the Grade 3 and 4 combined grade class that she taught. She felt that the vast majority of teachers in her school did not want to be assigned to a combined-grade class. She volunteered for the position and had a very positive teaching and learning experience. She discovered that a combined grade classroom provided greater flexibility in classroom organization, increased individualized instruction, improved opportunities to group children according to ability rather than grade level, and allowed for cross-age tutoring. She concluded, “It’s a special situation and the rewards are just as special” (pp. 48-54).

Bush (1989), in her discussion on parental acceptance of combined grades, concluded that communication between administration and parent, parental involvement in the classroom, and videotapes showing instruction and activities in a combined grade were good public relations tools. When properly utilized, these tools could help to make parents more accepting of a combined-grade assignment for their child.

Siler and Hayden (1989) described their concerns about Grade 1 students progressing to the next grade who had not met all the curricular requirements for Grade 1. Their solution to the problem was to establish a combined Grade 1 and 2 class for the following year. During the year they noticed that cooperation and collaboration replaced the competitiveness. Able students assumed the role of tutors. As a result of an informal parent survey, they realized that more communication with parents was necessary if parents were to understand the developmental issues involved in combined grades and the need for teachers to put an emphasis on the learning process rather than product.

Mulcahy (1993) felt that the combined-grade teaching concerns of the small rural schools in Newfoundland and Labrador had received little attention. He suggested that it was due partly to combined grades being considered as a temporary anomaly and partly to the belief that combined grades are essentially the same as a single grade. His recommendations were that combined grades needed experienced teachers who had professional training in effective strategies for combined grades and that a modified or distinctive curricula should be specifically developed for combined grades. Naylor (2000) also reported that the combined-grade teaching concerns in elementary schools in British Columbia were not understood or considered important. He expressed the same concern about teachers needing professional training for teaching combined grades but stated that student learning needs should be addressed as well.

Walser (1998) reported on the experience of a school that had implemented combined grades throughout the school because they had experienced an extreme population growth. Teachers at the school were very positive about the change in classroom organization. In a survey at the end of the year they reported that they saw the students with different abilities and different points of view working together in the classroom. The teachers reported that the combined classrooms were more of a reflection of real life.

The professional literature cited research studies relevant to combined-grade teaching and also reported information about specific classrooms and schools. In summary, the professional literature suggests that there is no significant difference in student achievement in combined grades, that student learning is more collaborative and cooperative in combined grades, that teachers and administrators need more professional development to teach and organize combined grades, and that schools need to provide opportunities and information for parents to help them understand combined grades. The authors of the professional literature on combined grades were supportive of the combined-grade classroom organization.

Review of the Research Literature on Combined Grades

Teacher and Administrator Beliefs About Combined Grades

What teachers and administrators believe regarding the teaching and learning in a combined grade should be considered when organizing the school for combined-grade classes. Many studies have been done since the 1970s on the advantages and disadvantages of combined grades as seen from the perspectives of teachers and administrators. Some of the research relating to this question is provided in Table 2.

In addition to these individual studies, there were two comprehensive analyses of studies related to teacher and administrator beliefs. Miller (1991) found that teachers, in the 13 studies that he reviewed, believed that there were many rewards for teaching in a combined grade, but there were also challenges. Students in combined-grade groupings had positive attitudes towards themselves as learners, and positive peer interactions and cooperation skills were enhanced. The complex and demanding challenges for teachers were planning for instruction, classroom organization, and classroom management. A teacher had to attend to the developmental differences in students and to be well prepared for the day's instruction. Demands on teacher time required well-developed organizational skills. The combined classroom was not for the inexperienced teacher.

Veenman (1995) found from his review of 56 studies that teachers and administrators who were advocates of combined grades agreed that teaching a diverse group of students demanded individualized instruction. The teachers also agreed that in combined grades, fewer student anxieties developed, the self-concepts of slower and older student were enhanced, and the class organization encouraged cooperation. Teachers who were opponents of combined grades claimed that teaching a combined

Table 2

Research on Teachers and Administrators Beliefs About Combined Grades

Researchers	Methodology	Findings
Gajadharsingh (1983) Saskatchewan	Compared results of questionnaires that collected data from principals and teachers about existing multigrade classrooms in the province of Saskatchewan. 437 teachers (72.5%) and 220 principals (73%) responded.	Teachers and principals agreed that enrolment should be lower in combined grades. Teachers in this study accepted the combined-grade assignment because it was the only assignment available. Teachers were concerned about, helping one grade while instructing the other grade, specific curriculum for combined grades, and insufficient time for planning and marking. Principals felt that teacher selection was important. Group work, combining courses, individualized instruction, and independent research was the most frequently used strategies. Teachers needed assistance with strategies in planning and organizing their day.
Mirsky (1984) Long Island, New York	A one-year systematic observation and journaling of combined class of gifted students.	Younger students challenged themselves with the older students' work. Older students' exhibited a willingness to teach and work together with younger students. Classroom atmosphere of mutual cooperation served to stimulate intellectual and social development.
Pratt and Treacy (1986) Western Australia	Compared results from attitude surveys of 10 combined-grade teachers and 4 single-grade teachers in 11 schools. Teachers were matched on their experience.	Combined-grade teachers believed that there was an increased work load and more time required for programming and preparations of materials, for marking tests, for providing attention to individual students, and for student reflections. Rural teachers accepted combined grades better than urban teachers did.
Walsh (1989) Connecticut	Compared results from surveys and systematic classroom observations of nine combined-grade teachers in an urban school district.	Teachers believed that the greatest advantage was for students in the lower grade because they were exposed to the curriculum at the upper level; students assigned to a combined grade should be average to high ability, and class size should be limited.
Brown & Martin (1989) New Brunswick	Compared results from surveys of 16 teachers and 4 principals with combined grades. Participants were required to have experience in both combined and single grades.	Majority of teachers female, 79% preferred teaching a single grade, 35% preferred a combined grade, and 17% had no preference. Teachers and principals believed teacher preparation greater in a combined grade and there was less time for discussing curriculum topics.

(table continues)

Researchers	Methodology	Findings
Galton & Patrick (1990) London, England	Compared results from systematic classroom observations of combined-grade teacher practices in 168 primary schools in a large urban public district.	Teachers' behaviors in combined classes were similar to that in single-age classes. Teachers believed that the difference in organization of classes was in the degree of difference in student ability rather than the kind of students. Individualization of work generally meant individualization of pace only, not of content.
James (1991) Nepean, Ontario	Compared results from 21 interviews with 24 teachers and 8 principals. 15 were English combined-grade teachers, 8 were French immersion-combined teachers, and 1 was a core French-combined teacher.	Principals believed that teachers' attitude was key to success Most common mode of program delivery was a 'mini lesson' to one group while the other group worked on follow-up activities. In a combined class student's had increased peer coaching, less time for oral activities, and more written activities. Teachers believed that students became more cooperative, independent, respectful of others' abilities, and more easily frustrated, less persistent, and did less good work.
Gayfer (1991) Toronto	Compared results of questionnaires sent to school boards across Canada from superintendents, principals, and teachers.	80% of teachers' used single-grade curriculum to teach combined grades. Administrative considerations, not pedagogical ones, were major considerations in organizing combined grades. Principals believed that a combined grade was not a positive experience. Teachers believed that a combined grade meant integrating curriculum, individualizing instruction, and lack of time for adequately teaching some subjects and preparing classroom materials.
Brandsma (1993) Netherlands	Compared results from observations and videotaped lessons of 74 combined and 118 single grades. A multilevel approach with a pretest-posttest design was used to simultaneously analyze the data at the levels of school and class.	Instruction, classroom organization, curriculum content, and materials differed in combined grades. Fewer instances of cooperative, innovative curriculum, and individualized instruction. Teacher-directed and independent work varied. Curriculum in single grades was more completely covered.
Miller (1996) United States	Compared results of classroom and school observations in five schools that had combined grades for five years	Found dedicated teachers, supportive principals, solidarity, and teamwork. Administrative requirements for implementing combined grades were to review research, avoid mandates, change attitudes towards teaching and learning, and prepare for a long- term change through strategic small steps. Underlined the importance of teacher readiness and collaborative planning.

(table continues)

Researchers	Methodology	Findings
Gomolchuk & Piland (1995) Northern British Columbia	Compared results from surveys of 92 rural and urban elementary school teachers in combined grades.	Rural teachers more positive. Urban teachers felt classroom management was more of a problem in combined grades. Both needed inservice opportunities, sound research-based practices, and additional teaching resources.
Trusty & Beckenstein (1996) Virginia	Compared results of six teacher questionnaires and observations from two schools, one combined-grade teacher, and five single-grade teachers. Comparable student populations and socioeconomic levels.	Combined-grade teachers must know their students' abilities and differences and develop organizational skills and patterns. A skilled teacher is necessary in all classes, but required in a combined class.
Mason & Burns (1996) California	Compared results of interviews and questionnaires from 35 combined-grade teachers. Teachers taught in 16 schools within three districts, each known for its cultural diversity. The teachers ranged in experience.	Teachers (83%) felt that students should be assigned to combined grades according to ability, independence, and/or behavior. 71% felt that there was little flexibility in organizing classes. 77% preferred not to teach combined classes. Three approaches for organizing students: two groups for all subjects, whole class for all subjects, and a mixed approach. Majority used mixed approach. Benefits: Lower-grade students were exposed to upper-grade material, and upper-grade students got review by coaching lower-grade students. Disadvantages: more preparation time for two curricula and less time for instruction and individual help.
Mason & Good (1996) California	Compared results from observations of three organizational formats in Math, 24 teachers (six combined grades, six single grades using within-class ability grouping; and 12 single grade using whole-class teaching) from small, medium, and large suburban districts.	Combined classes were complex and challenging for teachers. Fewer instances of peer tutoring, individualized instruction, and integrated curriculum. Single-grade classes' curricula more meaningfully presented and used cooperative groups more.
Mason & Doepner (1998) California	Compared results of surveys from 36 principals with varied experiences in combined grades.	Principals preferred single grades. Needed to assign experienced teachers to combined grades. Combined grades led to diminished curricula and more parent and teacher concerns. Recommended integrated and thematic curriculum, cooperative learning, and small-group instruction.

(table continues)

Researchers	Methodology	Findings
Russell, Rowe, & Hill (1998) Victoria, Australia	Compared results of interviews from 24 school leaders in six elementary schools that were selected based on their mean value-added learning progress scores in math and English. The sample comprised schools from government and Catholic, urban and semi rural, and small and large.	Teachers disenchanted with combined grades believed that it was harder work, preferred not to teach them. Administration believed combined grades a necessity when dealing with uneven numbers or very small classes.

grade took more planning, preparation, and work. Administrators who were opponents identified problems in the integration of curricula and individualizing instruction, as well as lack of time for adequate teaching of certain subjects, for preparation and assessment, and for individual remediation.

In summary, based on the studies reviewed, teachers would generally not choose to teach a combined grade, and administrators would not choose to organize classes as combined grades. Teachers and administrators were primarily concerned with curricular and pedagogical issues for students. In the combined grades, teachers struggled with trying to teach the curriculum for two grades in the time provided for a single grade. Administrators struggled with dealing with parents who were unhappy with this classroom organization. The results were often frustrated and overworked teachers and principals.

Parent Beliefs About Combined Grades

Many parents question whether the organization of combined grades is a good learning environment for children. Often parents lack experience with combined grades. Having their own children assigned to a combined grade is most often perceived by parents of students selected for such a class to be an unacceptable administrative decision. Goodlad and Anderson, as early as 1959, indicated that few schools have regarded it necessary to make formal studies of parents' opinions; however, a number of studies have been conducted to further understand what parents believe regarding combined classes. Some of the research relating to parent beliefs is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Research on Parent Beliefs about Combined Grades

Researchers	Methodology	Findings
Walsh (1989) Connecticut	Compared results of surveys from parents who had been actively involved with combined classes in an urban public school district that generally adhered to a single-grade approach.	Parents believed that the greatest advantage was the opportunity for students at the lower level to advance academically due to exposure to the curriculum of students at the upper level; the greatest liability was lack of teacher time. Overall, no parents would choose the combined-grade structure over the single-grade structure even after being actively involved in such classes.
Mason & Doepner (1998) California	Compared results of one survey question from 36 principals representing 36 schools from two of the largest counties in California.	Parents preferred single grades. The administrator spent time and energy dealing with the parental concerns about combined grades.
Russell, Rowe, & Hill (1998) Victoria, Australia	Compared results of surveys from parents of students in four combined grades from six schools.	Parents believed that combined grades were not a good idea for teachers or students. Urban parents were more opposed than rural parents. Parents tended to feel that children at the older level would not benefit from combined classes.

In addition to these individual studies, Veenman (1995) in his comprehensive synthesis of the combined grade research literature found that parents of students in combined grades feared that their children would not get adequate individualization and that they were genuinely worried about the teachers' ability to instruct two grade levels.

He found that principals felt that a lack of understanding was the main reason for parents' negative attitudes towards combined grades.

In summary, based on the studies reviewed, parents would generally not choose a combined class for their children. Parents were primarily concerned with their children's academic progress and with the quality of instruction in a combined grade.

Student Achievement

Today teachers, administrators, and parents continue to have questions about whether combined grades have a negative effect on student achievement. A considerable body of research has been conducted since the 1930s on the effects of combined grades on student achievement. Generally, the studies have compared the achievement of students in a combined grade or combined grades to the achievement of students in a single grade or single grades. Some of the recent research relating to that issue is provided in summary in Table 4.

In addition to these individual studies, there were five meta-analysis studies. Miller (1990) reviewed 13 experimental studies assessing academic achievement in single-grade and combined-grade classrooms that found no significant differences between them. Miller's analysis clearly supported the combined grade as a viable and equally effective organizational alternative to single-grade instruction. Although evidence suggested that there might be significant differences depending on the subject or grade, there were not enough such studies to make safe generalizations about which subjects or grade levels are best for combined instruction.

Anderson and Pavan (1993) replicated Pavan's 1973 study and reviewed 64 studies on combined-grade classrooms and school programs. Their review reported that

Table 4

Research on Student Achievement in Combined Grades

Researchers	Methodology	Findings
Stenhofer (1980) California	Compared the results from the Stanford Early School Achievement test of kindergarten and Grade 1 students in 25 combined grades and 28 single grades. Each of the combined classes had an aide.	No significant difference in achievement.
Way (1981) New York	Compared the results from the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills in the four core subjects. Students were selected from 145 combined classes and from 231 single classes in Grades 2 to 5.	No significant differences in achievement.
Rule (1983) Arizona	Compared 417 combined grades and 2,729 single grades in reading and math in grade 3 and 6 classes. The students matched on achievement scores, ethnicity, and gender. Achievement was compared for students with different placement levels and for students from different grade level configurations. .	Students in combined grades were not affected negatively in reading and math. The average and high placement was the most advantageous for all grades for reading and for Grades 4 to 6 for math. No detrimental effects when students were placed in combined grades. No information on students who were low achieving or mixed-ability groups because nearly all students placed in the combined grades were selected for that placement because they were higher-achieving students.
Veenman, Lem, Voeten, Winkelmolen & Lassche (1985) Netherlands	Compared both observational and achievement data for Grades 3 and 4 students in combined- and single-grade classes.	On the basis of observation and/or the basis of the pretest and posttest, no differences were found in achievement.
Spratt (1986) Virginia	Compared reading scores of students in combined and single grades. The Fairfax Program of Studies Tests was used as a pretest and post test of reading achievement.	Levels of reading achievement did not differ. However, academically higher students had been placed in the combined grades, which meant that the weaker students might have been concentrated in the single grades.
Stone (1986) United States	Compared the results from the Metropolitan Achievement Test of the core subjects in combined grades and single Grades 2 and 3 in a large suburban district.	No significant differences in achievement.

(table continues)

Researchers	Methodology	Findings
Gajadharsingh (1987) Saskatchewan	Compared the results from the Canadian Test of Basic Skills with a large sample of students in combined and single grades as a function of gender and locale.	Achievement in both the combined and single grades varied according to the locale. Rural combined grades: language, reading, and math were significantly higher. Urban combined grades: performed higher in the same core subjects. Overall results indicated that achievement in combined grades was higher than in single grades.
Gayfer (1991) Toronto	Compared the cognitive development of students in combined grades to students in single grades in the four core subjects across Canada. School boards were asked to provide student results from provincial testing and information regarding organization of combined grades.	80% of school boards' respondents stated that achievement of students in combined grades was superior or comparable to that of students in single grades. The selection bias of combined grades in the urban areas appeared to influence student achievement.
Stimson (1991) California	Compared the results from the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills of single and combined grades in nine year-round multitrack schools.	Single-grade students achieved higher levels than the combined-grade students. Higher achievers in combined grades fared worse that average, and low achievers but older students fared better than younger students.
Trusty (1995) Virginia	Compared the cognitive process of combined- and single-grade students randomly chosen from two schools using Literacy Development Assessment.	No substantial difference in cognitive development
Russell, Rowe, & Hill (1998) Australia	Compared the results from 59 schools with students in kindergarten, year 2 and 4 in combined and single grades. This large three-year longitudinal study analyzed the data from standardized tests, value-added progress in literacy and mathematics, and teacher interviews.	Analysis in 1993 revealed significant negative effects on achievement in literacy in combined grades. In 1994, results in numeracy and literacy were negative but not significant.

combined grades showed higher achievement than single grades, that the effect of combined grades on achievement and student self-esteem grew stronger over time, and that students who spent their entire elementary years in a combined-grade class were superior in performance.

Veenman (1995) examined 56 studies from 12 countries, including 33 studies from the United States, which compared standardized test results for single-grade classrooms with that of combined-grade classrooms. Nine of these studies had been included in Anderson and Pavan's 1993 study. Veenman concluded that the combined-grade classrooms appeared to be generally equivalent to single-grade classrooms in terms of student achievement. Mason and Burns (1996) reviewed the Veenman research about the differential effectiveness of combined grades and single grades. They critiqued Veenman's meta-analysis, and stated that he ignored the strategy of selection of students for combined grades as part of his explanation for his findings. They concluded that combined-grade classes had at least a small negative effect. They argued that the common practice of placing better students and teachers in the combined grades masked the effects because it reduced the quality of students and teachers in single-grade classes. In response, Veenman argued that there was no evidence of selection bias and no evidence showing that student learning suffered in combined classes.

Guskey (1997) summarized the research done as a result of Kentucky's Education Reform Act that mandated multiage primary schools in 1990. He used a quantitatively-based comparative research analysis. The results indicated that it was not how students were grouped for instruction, but the quality of instruction in the groups that was important to learning.

In summary, most research studies have found that the academic progress of students in a combined grade was no different that the academic progress of students in a single grade. If differences were found in the achievement of students, the differences were very small. There was little empirical evidence for the assumption that student learning is affected adversely in a combined grade.

Student Social and Personal Development

Combined-grade groupings allow for children's naturally uneven social and emotional development. There is evidence to support the opinion that combined grades ease some social difficulties with students and that combined grades more closely reflect the type of environment in which students will find themselves when they leave school. The research also supported the idea of positive social development of students in combined grades. Students in combined grades may have more positive attitudes towards themselves as learners and school. As well, they may have more positive peer interaction and higher self-esteem. Some of the research relating to the affective development of students in combined grades is provided in summary in Table 5.

Table 5

Research on the Affective Development of Students in Combined Grades

Researchers	Methodology	Findings
Way (1981) New York	Compared results from the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale for students in Grades 2 through 5 in both combined and single grade classes.	No significant differences in the self-concept, personal adjustment, or motivation of students.
Mirsky (1984) Long Island, New York	Analyzed results from systematic observations of gifted students in a combined grade.	Found that younger students desired to take part in tasks designed for and performed by older students. Social growth and mutual cooperation was fostered.
Pratt & Treacy (1986) Western Australia	Compared results from a class inventory of attitudes of students in Grades 1 and 2 in combined and single grades.	Attitudes of students in combined grades did not differ significantly from those in single grades.

(table continues)

Researchers	Methodology	Findings
Elder (1996) Indiana	Compared results from student surveys of behavior in students in Grades 2, 3, and 4 in combined and single grades.	Results indicated students in combined grades had better attendance and their willingness to work with children of other ages increased.
McClellan & Kinsey (1997) Illinois	Compared results from a teacher rating scale of the prosocial, aggressive, and friendship behaviors of students in Grades 1 through 5 from four schools with different socioeconomic standards.	Results indicated combined grades had a significant positive effect on children's prosocial behavior. Fewer children appeared to experience social isolation in combined grades than in single grades.
Gaustad (1997) Oregon	Compared results from interviews and observations of combined and single grade classes in Grades 1 through 6.	Results indicate that combined grouping promoted social growth and reduced antisocial behavior. It discouraged misleading age-graded expectations of students.
Mason & Doepner (1998) California	Compared results from interviews with 36 principals about students' social skills and peer relationships. Students had experienced both combined and single grades in their schools.	Results indicated that students in combined grades developed better social skills and learned effectively from their peers.
Russell, Rowe, & Hill (1998) Australia	Compared results from a survey of six primary combined-grade schools based on schools' mean value-added learning progress scores and mathematics for two years. The results were based on the conceptual analysis of the perceptions, preferences, opinions, and knowledge communicated by individuals during case study interviews.	Results indicated that students in combined grades were more mature and had positive social groupings.

In addition to these individual studies, there were two comprehensive studies. Miller (1991) stated that, although combined-grade organization had no advantage or disadvantage in terms of student achievement, when it came to student affect, the case for combined-grade organization appeared much stronger. Miller explored teachers' written accounts of actual practice in combined grades. Of the 21 separate measures used to assess student affect in the studies reviewed, 81% favored the combined classroom.

Analysis indicated that one of the key advantages of combined grades was the development of both independence and interdependence among students.

Veenman (1995), from his review of 56 studies, found that students had a chance to form relationships with a wider variety of children than was possible in the traditional same-age classroom. This led to a greater sense of belonging, support, security, and confidence; fewer anxieties developed because the educational atmosphere was conducive not only to academic progress, but also to personal growth. He also found that the self-concepts of slower older students were enhanced when they were asked to tutor younger students. Students in the lower grades could enrich their learning by attending to the material designed for higher grades, and the students in the higher grade could profit from opportunities to review the material designed for the lower grade. Finally, the younger students had the opportunity to observe, emulate, and imitate a wide range of behaviors, and older students had the opportunity to assume responsibility for less mature and less knowledgeable students.

In summary, the research suggested that, in the affective areas such as attitude towards school, self-concept, and personal and social adjustment, students are generally better off in a combined-grade class than in a single-grade class. History and convention have dictated the prevalence of the graded classroom. However, there is compelling evidence from the students themselves and from classroom practitioners that combined grades have benefits for students' affective development.

Summary of the Literature on Combined Grades

The four tables summarizing the research completed on combined grades demonstrate that a large number of studies have been completed on this topic in the past two decades. The research showed that administrators found problems in the integration of curricula, individualizing instruction, lack of time for adequate teaching of certain subjects, lack of time for preparation and assessment, and lack of time for individual remediation. Teachers preferred single grade classes because combined classes entail more planning, preparation and work. Parents were negative towards combined grades, as they feared their children would not get adequate individualization. The achievement of students in combined grades showed there were few significant differences when compared to the achievement of students in single grades. The combined classroom generally enhances the self-concept of students, invites cooperation and enriches the learning of students in the lower grade while the students in the higher grade can profit from opportunities to review the material designed for the lower grade.

The literature review on combined grades was sufficiently conclusive to justify proceeding with the study as it was originally conceived. The research provided a great deal of information about combined grades. However, few studies have thoroughly addressed teacher planning related to teaching a combined grade, and there was a lack of individual descriptions of teacher's practice in the literature.

Teacher Planning

Teacher behavior is substantially influenced and even determined by teachers' thought processes. Teacher planning (preplanning and postplanning) and teachers' interactive thoughts and decisions are one aspect of the larger framework of the research on teacher thinking. Planning is challenging to study because it is both a psychological process and a practical activity. However, examining teacher planning provided a focus for examining teacher practice. Case study research has been used to examine teacher planning in general education settings (Borko & Livingston 1989; Lalik & Niles 1990; Yinger 1977). Studies of teacher planning have been conducted since 1970; however, there is a lack of research in the area of teacher planning in a combined grade. It was anticipated that the planning of teachers in a combined grade might be somewhat distinct from the planning of teachers in single grade.

A *teacher plan* is described as a "detailed and comprehensive mental image or set of expectations for the lesson" (Morine-Dershimer, 1977, p. 85). When teachers plan, they make decisions that involve developing, managing, implementing, and evaluating the instructional process to enhance student learning. These decisions are made before, during, or after the instruction (preplanning, interactive planning, and postplanning). Teacher planning is incremental, interactive, and reflective.

The planning model to which many teachers have been exposed is the preplanning 'objectives first' model described by Ralph Tyler (1949). Tyler proposed a linear model consisting of four steps: specify objectives, select learning activities related to those objectives, organize learning activities, and select or develop appropriate evaluation procedures. This model is still used somewhat today, particularly in lesson plan formats. However, studies on preplanning indicated that teachers did not focus on objectives first. Many teachers seemed to begin their planning process by focusing on instructional content and activities. For example, Zahorik (1975) found that teachers' planning decisions did not always follow a linear sequence from a specification of objectives and objectives were not a particularly important planning decision in terms of quantity of use.

The work of Yinger, beginning in 1977, expanded the work on teacher planning beyond preplanning. He studied teacher planning in a single grade by means of a detailed case study of the processes involved in one elementary teacher's planning decisions. His study addressed descriptive and theoretical models of planning processes and examined the usefulness of certain decision-modeling methods for describing the complex decisions that teachers made in the classroom. He concluded that much of the planning behavior could be portrayed as the selection, organization, and sequencing of routines developed as a result of experience. Yinger developed two models of planning. The first was a structural model of preactive planning, describing planning at five levels: yearly, term, unit, weekly, and daily. The second was a theoretical model that had three stages: problem solving, problem formulation and solution, and implementation of the plan, its evaluation and its eventual routinization.

Schumm and Vaughn (1992) adapted Yinger's (1977) models to investigate teacher planning for the diverse needs of students. They investigated teachers' preplanning, interactive planning and postplanning in elementary, junior high and high school settings. They interviewed teachers, observed classrooms, recorded teacher reflections and had teacher's complete surveys. The results indicated that the elementary teachers did more planning to include the need of diverse students than did junior high or high school teachers. Their model, the flow of planning process, shown in Figure 1, includes three types of planning, preplanning, interactive planning, and postplanning. The model also includes three factors that influence all three types of planning-the teacher, the environment and the student. Like the Yinger models, there are inter-relationships among the three types of planning and the factors that influence planning.

The components of an effective planning process, identified by Schumm and Vaughn (1992), constituted a framework for the literature review on planning in this study.

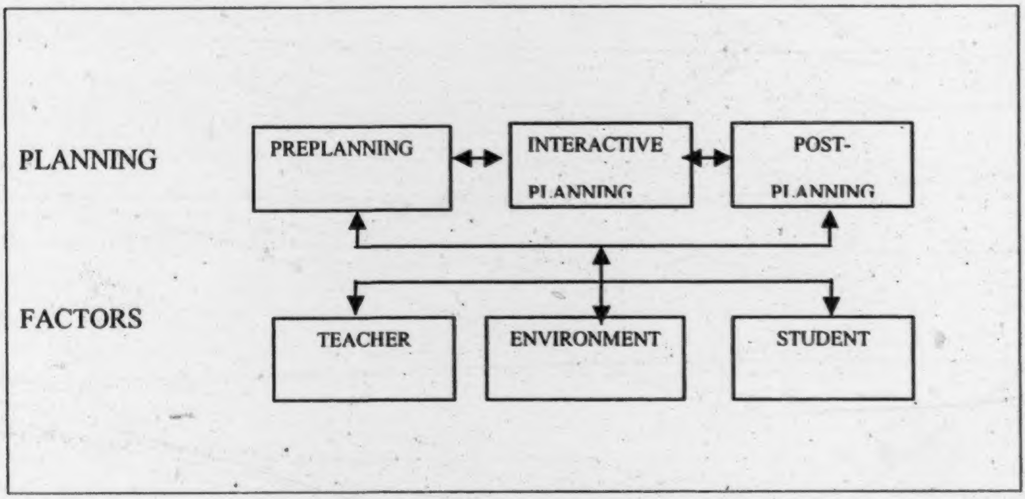
PLANNING
PREPLANNING
INTERACTIVE PLANNING
POST-PLANNING
FACTORS
TEACHER
ENVIRONMENT
STUDENT

Figure 1. Planning Process Model

Types of Planning

Preplanning

Preplanning occurs in the development of daily, weekly, unit, and long-range plans. It includes activities that relate to preparing a lesson or a set of learning experiences—reading, thinking, and gathering materials and resources. Preplanning also includes writing objectives, outlining procedures, and specifying desired outcomes and evaluation plans. Frequently, preplanning involves activities such as reading background material and thinking through procedures and grouping and considering the factors that enhance the lesson. Preplanning can also occur at various levels (i.e., daily, weekly, unit and long-range).

Clark and Yinger (1980) conducted three separate but related studies of teacher planning to validate and elaborate on the model of teacher planning proposed by Yinger (1977). Each study represented a different approach to investigating how teachers planned for instruction and what psychological processes operated in their planning. The three studies were: a survey of teacher planning practices, a laboratory study of teacher judgment in planning and a field study of the relationship between teacher planning and teacher implementation of instructions. The first study showed that learning objectives were seldom the starting point for planning and that planning seemed to operate not only as a means of organizing instruction but as a source of psychological benefits for the teacher. Teachers planned to meet immediate personal needs (to reduce anxiety and uncertainty and to find a sense of direction); to develop instruction (to learn, collect, and organize the material); and, to direct instruction (to organize students, plan an activity, and to provide a framework for instruction and evaluation). The laboratory study showed that teachers engaged in a four step process when making judgments about activities: understanding the activity, imagining using the activity, thinking of way to modify the activity, and creating a mental image of the revised version of the activity. The field study showed that each teacher's planning was unique. Clark and Yinger explored what elementary teachers thought was the most important kind of planning. Unit planning was cited most often, followed by weekly and daily plans.

Peterson and Clark (1986) in a study on planning, teaching, and student achievement, conducted with 12 teachers in a laboratory setting, found a number of positive relationships between the focus of teacher planning and teaching behavior. Initially, the teachers' planning was focused on curriculum content and then shifted to instructional processes. The planning statements dealing with the learner were positively and significantly correlated with teacher behaviors, and the planning statements dealing with the content also were positively and significantly correlated with teacher behavior. Peterson and Clark also suggested that the nature of the planning period changes with situation-specific teaching experience. As the task demands on the teacher change, so does the nature of appropriate preparation.

Schumm, Vaughn, Haager, McDowell, Rothlein, and Saumell (1995) conducted a study of 12 general education teachers and content area teachers in single grades. The study consisted of two surveys of teacher planning practices. The results showed that teachers were not likely to develop individualized lesson plans to meet the specific needs of students however, students could expect that teachers would consider how to meet their needs within the framework of planning for the whole class. In the elementary classrooms preplanning included whole-class and individualized activities appropriate for diverse student needs.

Earle (1996) completed two studies on instructional design practices in North Carolina. The first study, involving 22 elementary teachers, compared the extent to which a systems approach to instructional planning was employed. The second study, involving 17 elementary teachers, compared teachers who were taught the instructional design practices with teachers who had not been taught these practices. Both groups responded to surveys and interviews that examined teachers' practices in yearly, unit, and daily planning. The results of both studies indicated trends or patterns in the elementary teachers' planning and delivery practices. The teachers favored mental planning while recognizing the importance of written planning, particularly at the unit level. Production of written plans was closely related to administrative requirements. Plans tended to be more specific at the unit levels in all areas. Goals, learner analysis, objectives, activities and strategies, tests, and revisions were addressed formally in writing, whereas task analysis, types of learning, and instructional plans was addressed informally and mentally. Trying out the instruction prior to using it in the classroom was impractical for elementary teachers. They relied on mental imagery and planning to test the instruction prior to delivery.

In summary, the research on preplanning indicates that if occurs at a whole class level and the thinking generated in preplanning is driven more by content and learner characteristics than by objectives. Preplanning does not occur in a linear fashion; it includes goals, learner analysis, objectives, activities, and strategies; and it is addressed formally and in written plans.

Interactive Planning

Interactive planning involves monitoring and adapting the lesson in response to student progress (Borko, Eisenhart, & Vandett, 1984; Lampert & Clark, 1990). Teachers also make adaptations on an incidental basis during ongoing instruction (Schumm & Vaughn, 1992). Preplanning shapes the broad outline of what is possible or likely to occur while teaching and is used to manage transitions from one activity to another. When the teacher begins teaching, the plan moves to the background, and interactive decision-making becomes more important. The teachers reconstruct the plan from memory, rather than checking the written plan closely. As the lesson develops, they often put the written plan aside and make numerous interactive decisions based upon their reading of student reaction and their assessment of student learning.

Smith and Sendlebach (1979) compared explicit instructions provided in the teacher manual with four teachers' transformation of those directions into plans, and finally with their actual classroom behavior. The results indicated the teachers formed a mental picture of the unit to be taught, the sequence of activities, and the students' probable responses. Sketchy notes and lists of important points the teacher wanted to be sure to remember supplemented these mental plans. The study suggested that some teachers use interactive and mental planning rather than writing careful plans.

Carnahan (1980) studied the planning and subsequent behavior of nine fifth-grade teachers teaching the same two-week unit. The quality of the teachers' written plans was rated; plans that focused on large groups were rated as low in quality, whereas plans that focused on individuals or small groups were rated as high in quality. Classroom observers assessed the quality of the teachers' instructions, clarity, use of motivation strategies, and student engagement. The results indicated that there were no significant relationships between ratings of plan quality and of instruction. Carnahan did find a significant positive correlation between the total percentage of written planning statements about small groups or individuals and the observed use of small groups in the classroom. Carnahan indicated that the relationship between preplanning and interactive planning was in the organization of teaching rather than verbal behavior. During interactive teaching the responses of students were unpredictable, and therefore dialogue with students may not be a worthwhile focus for teacher planning.

Teachers develop learning outcomes during interactive planning as well as during preplanning. McLeod (1981) in a study of 17 kindergarten teachers found that 46% of intended learning outcomes were identified during the interactive stage. This study suggested that teachers can and do think about and act to support both specific and general learning outcomes for their students when they are providing instruction to students.

In summary, instructional adaptations are often made during the act of teaching. The finer details of classroom teaching, for example, specific behaviors of children in the classroom, are unpredictable, not planned, and interactive. Practices such as adjusting the time, and pace of assignments, monitoring student understanding and providing for peer support are activities that teachers value and use.

Postplanning

Postplanning focuses on activities that relate directly to plans that reflect on the lessons taught. Reflective teaching requires that teachers think deeply about the theory and practice of teaching and evaluate their effectiveness. Student reaction to a lesson influences postplanning and provides teachers with directions for their next lessons. Postplanning may involve a new lesson, reteaching, or projections for next year.

Teachers vary in their approaches to postplanning. For example, Reiser and Mory (1991) compared the postplanning approaches of two experienced teachers, one trained in planning and one not trained in planning. The trained teacher changed her plans for later activities based on the results of her assessment of the lesson plan and the untrained teacher did not revise, evaluate or change her lesson plans for subsequent activities.

Schumm et al. (1995) conducted two surveys of teacher planning practices and carried out intense classroom observations of 12 general education teachers. The results indicated that teachers at the elementary level were more likely to revise plans for subsequent lessons, based on student performance on assignments and tests.

In summary, the teachers develop a style of planning for instruction that includes several interrelated types of planning. During postplanning, teachers reflect upon and analyze the apparent outcome of their plans and their own teaching. As well, teachers may reflect on class performance during a lesson. The results of these reflections to their future plans and actions may help expand and extend the students' skills and understanding of the concept.

Factors That Influence Planning

Teacher-Related Factors

Teacher-related factors include the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the teacher towards planning. Other teacher-related factors that influence planning are the practices resulting from planning and the teacher's motivation and confidence for planning. The nature of the plans generally depends upon the nature of the lesson or topic, the amount of experience a teacher has, the personality of the teacher, and the special skills of the teacher.

Reiser and Mory (1991) compared the approaches of two experienced teachers, one trained in planning and one not trained in planning. The teachers were observed regularly; they completed questionnaires and interviews asking them to describe specific aspects of their planning. The trained teacher wrote down plans in detail, prepared objectives, designed activities, and implemented assessments. The untrained teacher did not write down her plans, did not design activities, and did not employ objectives-based assessment. The students who were taught by both teachers were given questionnaires. Students indicated that they learned more in the classroom of the teacher who wrote her plans.

Mostert (1992) investigated pupil responses to 10 lessons planned and taught by teachers. Using videotapes and stimulated-recall interviews, he found that the pupil responses appeared to change according to the planning perspectives exhibited by the teacher. In lessons taught by teachers who emphasized pupil characteristics and teaching principles in planning, pupils reported hearing more pupil-oriented key-idea statements. When teachers did not emphasize pupil characteristics or teaching principles, the off-task behavior of pupils was higher. This suggests that emphasis on pupil characteristics and teaching principles can make a separate and independent contribution to the teacher's effectiveness.

Fuchs, Fuchs, and Phillips (1994) examined the relation between teachers' beliefs about the importance of good student work habits and teachers' reports of their responsiveness to student academic performance during planning. Analysis indicated that teachers with strong beliefs about the importance of good student work habits and classroom behavior reported that they planned with greater responsiveness to students' performance. Average-achieving and learning-disabled students in their studies performed better on provincial achievement tests when their teacher had strong beliefs about good student work habits.

In summary, the teachers who focus on pupil characteristics, carefully written plans, and students good work habits create a positive learning environment for children.

Environment-Related Factors

Environment-related factors, such as demands for curriculum coverage, accountability for results, and the emphasis on hands-on activities, influence teachers' planning and the types of adaptation that they make. Teachers know that it is important to teach to the individual child's needs and to make adaptations to their plans for this; however, this may be difficult given the restrictions of budgets, class size, and access to resources.

McCutcheon (1981), working with 12 elementary teachers, confirmed that some teachers plan only to meet the administrative requirement. He also found that some teachers believed that substitute teachers' only work was to maintain control of student behavior. Plans written by the teacher for a substitute looked different from the teacher's usual plans; they included a great deal of background information on the school and students, and usually did not include learning activities in the four core subjects.

Branch (1994) surveyed 61 teachers. Overall he found that the planning activities of classroom teachers correlated with the way that teachers instructed students and that such a relationship is influenced by the subject taught. For example, teacher plans in math were written detailed instructions on concept development while teacher plans in science were less detailed with few written notes that described an experiment, demonstration or activity students would be engaged in.

In summary, the teacher may plan to meet the needs of administrators, substitute teachers, and a particular subject area but may not plan for other subjects or on a daily basis.

Student-Related Factors

Student-related elements include students' engagement and interest in the subject matter and tasks, their level of attention, their use of effective learning strategies and motivation, their behavior patterns, and their level of background knowledge (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1990).

Schumm et al. (1995) found that students' perceptions of teachers' adaptations might also affect the teachers' future attempts to meet individual student needs. If students responded negatively to differential treatment, then teachers were less likely to plan for adaptations in the future. Students generally preferred teachers who made adaptations to promote understanding but did not appreciate adaptations that might identify a student as weaker.

Moallem and Applefield (1997) examined the relation between instruction and teacher-planning research. The models of instruction developed must acknowledge the natural tendency of teachers to move quickly in their mental planning to selecting activities that will grab their students' attention, imagination, and interest.

In summary, teachers need to consider students' needs, and the kind of activities that will motivate the students learning when planning.

Reflection on the Framework

At present Alberta Learning has mandated that each teacher complete a yearly growth plan. The plan is to be reviewed and referred to throughout the year. As well, many administrators ask teachers to submit long-range plans and at least one unit plan per year. During the year, in many schools, each teacher's lesson plans are monitored and classrooms are observed.

My personal experience with regard to combined classrooms has been interesting and challenging. Curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation are an extensive, continuous process in combined classrooms. I found that asking the teachers to plan their instructional practices carefully and to reflect on their daily, unit, and long-range plans before, during, and at the end of the year, in writing, was beneficial for the teachers. To address concerns and to ensure that parents and students were supportive, teachers needed to demonstrate and communicate a positive and effective learning organization to parents and students.

A case study of a combined class was one way to examine and more fully understand the demands of teaching in a combined grade and the ways in which the teacher responded to these demands. The case study provided the opportunity to describe the full range of kinds of planning that a teacher did during the school year, the interrelationships between these kinds of planning, and the factors that influenced planning.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN

Interpretive Research

> Some studies naturally lend themselves more to qualitative types of research, for instance, research that attempts to uncover the nature of persons' experiences with a phenomenon like illness, religious conversion, or addiction. Qualitative methods can be used to uncover and understand what lies behind any phenomenon about which little is yet known. It can be used to gain novel and fresh slants on things about which quite a bit is already known. Also, qualitative methods can give the intricate details of phenomena that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 19)

Because the purpose of this study was to better understand teacher practices and planning in a combined classroom, the best source of data was the teacher. The literature review supports the assumption that little research is available regarding the teacher's work in a combined grade classroom. My intent as a researcher was to go beyond describing a combined classroom to an explanation of what the teacher did through her planning that made the classroom successful. "By learning the perspectives of the participants, qualitative research illuminates the inner dynamics of situations—dynamics that are often invisible to the outsider" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 58).

Case Study Research

This study used as its method of data collection and analysis a case study approach. The case study method is commonly used in education. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) have described a case study as a "detailed examination of one setting" (p. 58). Because of the complex interaction between the teacher, the children, and the program in a combined grade, case study was an appropriate approach to the research design. It assisted the researcher in coming to a comprehensive understanding of the teacher's experiences in planning for instruction in a combined grade.

Merriam (1998) has described case study research as the intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, institution, person, process, or social unit. A bounded system is one in which "the boundaries have a common-sense obviousness, for example, an individual teacher, a single school, or perhaps an innovatory programme" (Adelman, Jenkins, & Kemmis, 1983, p. 3). The bounded system comes closest to the single most defining characteristic of case study research (Merriam, 1998). A case study approach is often the best methodology for addressing problems in which understanding is sought in order to improve practice:

> Most case studies in education approach a problem from holistic perspective. That is, investigators use a case study design in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and it's meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Such insights into aspects of educational practice can have a direct influence on policy, and future research. (Merriam 1998, p. xii)

Yin (1988) defined case study in terms of the research process: "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon with its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 27). He also suggested that, for a "how " or "why " question, the case study has distinct advantages. Because I was interested in "how " the teacher planned and her explanations of "why " she felt the way she did, a case study approach seemed best suited to my research question.

Researchers have various purposes for studying cases. Stake (2000) identified three types of study.

1. Intrinsic case study: The case itself is interesting. It provides a better understanding of a particular case. For example, the study is undertaken because of an intrinsic interest in a particular child, clinic, conference, or curriculum.

2. Instrumental case study: The case itself is of secondary interest. The instrumental study facilitates an understanding of something else and provides insight into an issue or refinement of theory. For example, a study of a particular city may be undertaken to understand the issue of Canadian culture.

3. Collective case study: The case itself is of even less interest. The collective study is an instrumental study extended to several cases. Individual cases in the collection may or may not manifest the common characteristics. It facilitates an understanding that by examining a number of cases, the researcher may be able to apply this knowledge to an even larger collection of cases. For example, a study of a particular group of children may lead to a better understanding of all children at risk of not completing their schooling.

Case study research reveals not static attributes, but understanding of humans as they engage in action and interaction within the contexts of situation and settings. The intent of this study was to better understand the planning and thinking of one teacher in a combined-grade classroom. The study of one teacher in a combined grade could provide a greater understanding of combined grades, specifically what made this classroom successful. The instrumental case study was appropriate for this research because the study of one teacher's experience was specific and unique and occurred in a bounded context.

Ethical Considerations

The guidelines of the University Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants were adhered to in the development of this research proposal. I completed a Cooperative Activities Program application, and consent was obtained from the school board of the staff member participating in the study.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained in writing from the participant prior to the start of the study. The participant was made aware of her right to withdraw from the study without penalty at any time. The participant was informed about the research in a variety of ways, and the researcher respected the participant's ownership of material that she generated. The identity of the participant was kept confidential. The participant was invited to review, amend, or delete any part of the transcribed interview and the drafts of the thesis prior to publication.

Selecting the Participant

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) have suggested that the most unique aspect of case study is the selection of the case to be studied. Patton (1990) described the procedures that case study researchers use to select their cases as *purposeful sampling*. The goal of purposeful sampling is to select cases that are information rich with respect to the researcher's purpose.

The decision to explore my study questions by using a case study method necessitated identifying a teacher in a combined classroom who would be willing to undertake considerable responsibility. An in-depth study of an elementary teacher in a combined grade would clarify my understanding of the research question; therefore, careful selection of the participant was essential. I was particularly interested in a teacher who was highly regarded by the principal and thought of as an exemplary teacher of a combined grade.

The selection of the setting and the specific participant depended on the willingness of the principal and the teacher to participate. The specific selection criteria were that the teacher was full time, that the teacher had at least two years' experience teaching in a combined-grade classroom, and that the teacher was considered exemplary by the principal in his or her teaching practice.

The focus of my research involved understanding the planning and thinking of the teacher; therefore, it was particularly important that the teacher be articulate and reflective and skilful. I requested an exemplary, experienced teacher for this study for two reasons. A teacher with experience teaching combined grades would have a wider perspective and a variety of background experiences that stood to influence how he or she approached the combined grade, and this would prove helpful in interview situations. A teacher who was identified as exemplary would likely be more credible and dependable. Readers of this research should be able to easily identify with the teacher and understand the teacher's decisions in this situation.

Data Collection

Collecting qualitative data through interviews, observations and documents, or in Wolcott's (1992) "common, everyday terms" is about "asking, watching, and reviewing"(p. 19). Qualitative data include "direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge" obtained through interviews, through "detailed descriptions of people's activities, behaviors, actions" recorded in observations; and through "excerpts, quotations, or entire passages" (Patton, 1990) extracted from various types of documents (p.10). Data could also be collected through stimulated recall. Stimulated recall is an introspective method in which participants are prompted (via some visual or oral stimulus such as a video/audiotaped event, or any other tangible reminder such as different drafts of a composition, etc.) to recall thoughts they entertained while carrying out certain tasks or participating in certain events. This method is superior in some instances to a simple post hoc interview in that the participant does not need to rely heavily on memory without any prompts. Moreover, it has an advantage over think-aloud protocols because the participant does not need to go through a process of training in order to be able to perform a task and talk about it simultaneously. Through the use of stimulated recall, "a subject may be enabled to relive an original situation with great vividness and accuracy if he or she is presented with a large number of cues or stimuli which occurred during the original situation" (Bloom, 1954, p. 25).

The primary data-collection procedures for this research included taped interviews, informal conversations, classroom observations, and videotaping with stimulated-recall interviews. Data sources also included field notes and collected documents.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting data. The quality of the research depends upon the breadth and depth of the data collected and how well the researcher works to understand and represent the participant's meaning and experience. Given that I observed, interviewed, and analyzed the data, I needed to keep in mind the important attributes of researchers as identified by Merriam (1998): tolerance for ambiguity, sensitivity to context and data, and good communication skills. My hope was to describe a situation in such detail that others who read it could easily recognize similarities and differences in situations they have experienced or may encounter.

Merriam (1998) cautioned researchers about the subjectivity and complexity inherent in an interview encounter. Seidman (1991) suggested that, although it is important to be highly sensitive to these issues and take them into account throughout the study, "interviewing requires interviewers to have enough distance to enable them to ask real questions and to explore, not to share, assumptions" (p. 77). Generally, the interviews were semistructured. The main reason for selecting the semi-structured interview was to allow "the interviewer . . . sufficient freedom to digress . . . [so that the researcher could] approach the world from the subject's perspective" (Berg, 1989, p. 17).

Patton (1990) stated, "the purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else's mind" (p. 278). Interviews are carried out to discover that which cannot be observed directly. It is a way to access an individual's thoughts, feelings, and intentions that otherwise may not be available through more traditional research methods. In the interview the teacher was asked to reflect orally on her lessons or units. Through questioning and discussion, the interviewer attempted to understand the way the teacher understood or experienced her teaching. "Effective interviews should cause both the interviewer and the interviewee to feel that a 2-way flow of communication is going on" (Patton, 1990, p. 327). During the interviews I shared some of my own personal experiences with teaching to ensure that the relationship was one of mutual dialogue. As Oakley (1981) insisted, there is "no intimacy without reciprocity" (p. 49).

As the researcher, it was important that I understand how to be a careful, systematic observer. Boostrom (1994) has alerted us to three different stages through which an observer can go: first, the researcher as a "video camera" inertly receiving visual and aural stimuli; second, the researcher as a playgoer drawn in the lives of the participants; and, third, the researcher as an evaluator having evaluative thoughts of what is being observed.

Stimulated recall was initially described by Bloom (1954) almost 50 years ago as a method to revive the memories of students after class "in order to recall the thoughts that occurred during it" (p. 25). Kagan, Krathwohl and Miller (1963) used it in what they termed "interpersonal process recall." Stimulated recall was used as a means to probe more deeply into a subject's thoughts and feelings as he or she interacted with others. They wrote, "It assumes that if a subject is given enough cues and clues it will help him relive an experience" (p. 18).

There are several good practical reasons for videotaping teacher practice and using the stimulated-recall method. Activities in the classroom may occur so quickly that observers may miss details and implicit components of the work without the possibility of video replay. Often it offers a more efficient way of gaining an understanding of the teacher's practice. Stimulated-recall interviews can be used as a complementary approach to videotaping and analyzing naturally occurring work activities. It is helpful for joining analyses of work practice; both the participant and the researcher can learn in the process. As well, it provides the participant an opportunity to distance him- or herself from the work, which is an ability that is very difficult to achieve amidst the everyday routines of carrying out the work. As well, there are some disadvantages to this method. Gass and Mackey (2000) stated that it may be intrusive, there could be inaccurate reporting on the part of the participants, and this method is dependent upon the verbal skills of the participant.

Admitting such shortcoming as the limitations of this research tool, Gass and Mackey (2000) reminded researchers that no methodology is without critics, and most probably no research tool is without limitations. The authors recommended some measures to be taken in order to minimize the limitations. I studied these examples and applied them to my stimulated-recall sessions.

Collected documents represented a final source of data. Yin (1988) suggested that documents are helpful in verifying the correct spellings and titles or names of organizations that might have been mentioned in an interview, documents could provide other specific details to corroborate information from other sources, and documents could provide inferences, but one must use these as only clues worthy of further investigation.

The multiple methods of data collection allowed me the opportunity of *triangulation*, defined by Denzin and Lincoln (1998) as the use of multiple methods and a way to validate the data. "Methodological triangulation combines dissimilar methods such as interviews, observations and physical evidence to study the same unit" (Merriam 1998, p. 208).

Data Analysis

The starting point for analysis is to ensure that the data are as complete as possible. When conducting a case study, the researcher gathers comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information about the case of interest. This case study was an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single bounded unit, the classroom. I integrated the strands of the research data from many sources and from each of the data-gathering methods; that is, interviewing, observations, documents, videotapes, and field notes.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) noted how important it was for researchers to write down their thoughts throughout the collection period. They suggested that rather than allowing the recording of detailed description to dominate the researchers' activities to the exclusion of formulating hunches, the researcher should record important insights that came to them during data collection before they are lost. As I noticed that certain subjects had things in common, I noted that in my fieldnotes and researcher journal. The idea was to stimulate critical thinking about what I saw and to become more than a recording machine. As Merriam (1988) stated, " Much of the work in category construction is a form of content analysis. One is, after all, looking at the content of the data in developing categories" (p. 136).

The process of grouping concepts that seemed to pertain to the same phenomena is what Glaser and Strauss (1967) called *categorizing*. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggested that categories have conceptual power because they are able to "pull together around them, other groups of concepts or subcategories" (p. 65).

Conducting the Research

In early June, the teacher who had initially volunteered to participate in my study contacted me and informed me that she would not be teaching a combined grade in the fall. I quickly began the process of finding a new participant for my research. E-mail messages were sent to approximately 80 elementary principals in a large urban public school district. Classroom organization based on projected enrolments for the following school year was planned by this time in the year. However, I was well aware that in some schools enrolment fluctuated dramatically and classroom organization could change in September. Because I was hoping to begin my research early in September, included in the e-mail message was a caution to principals that if they were going to recommend a teacher, they needed to be as sure as possible that the teacher would be teaching a combined grade in the fall. The message also provided a short description of the research question and requested the nomination of an exemplary, experienced teacher who was highly regarded by his or her principal, and who might be willing to participate in my research. For the purpose of this study the term *exemplary teacher* was specifically selected to describe a teacher who can act as an exemplar for others and as an inclusive term that can easily embody such superlative terms as exceptional, wonderful, or excellent.

I included in my correspondence to the principals the nine characteristics from the Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Block, and Morrow (1998) study that distinguished successful classrooms. These characteristics were (a) high academic engagement and competence; (b) excellent classroom management; (c) positive, reinforcing, cooperative environment; (d) explicit teaching of skills; (e) explicit teaching skills; (f) literature emphasis (g) much reading and writing; (h) match of accelerating demands to student competence and scaffolding; (i) encouragement of self-regulation; and (j) strong connections across the curriculum. I believed that this information would assist the principals in identifying an exemplary teacher. This message was followed up by a package sent by mail to all principals that included the original message and more detailed information on the request and the research.

Although I felt confident that there were many combined classrooms with exemplary and experienced teachers in this district, I was less confident that there was a teacher who would welcome a researcher in the classroom who not only wanted to observe him or her for a lengthy time, but also wanted to give his or her own time to provide input into the study. These feelings were intensified by the knowledge that I was a principal in the district in which I was doing my research. I wondered whether the teacher would be hesitant about agreeing to the study because he or she felt that there might be an evaluative component to the research. Osborne and Freyberg (1985) warned, "Teachers who expose their classes to this kind of observation must be assured that their performance as teachers is in no way being judged" (p. 161).

Consequently, I sent an additional letter to the principals. It was addressed specifically to the teachers who were being considered by their principals, which clearly explained my role as a researcher and specifically stated that the information that I gathered would not be shared with his or her principal unless the participant gave permission, and that the participant in the study would be anonymous. The letter explained that all information gathered would be shared with the participant. It was also made clear that at any time he or she had the option to withdraw from the study.

Out of the 80 principals contacted, 13 responded with the names of teachers who were interested and whom the principals believed would be good participants for the study. I then phoned the teachers and discussed with each of them the general parameters of the study.

Selecting The Participant

After the initial contact with the teachers, I still had to select one participant. I decided to start with the five candidates who were working in schools in the same geographic location as I was working. In this group, there were teachers who would be teaching a combined Grade 2 and 3, a combined 3 and 4, a combined 4 and 5, and a combined 5 and 6. I phoned the five teachers and talked with them more specifically about the research. During our conversations, three of the teachers decided that they could not participate. This meant that I had two teachers who remained interested after the initial phone calls. After meeting the teachers and observing in classrooms, one appeared to me to be more enthusiastic and more interested in the study. This teacher taught a one/two combined grade. This teacher agreed to participate, and further meetings were confirmed. I contacted the other teacher I had observed, thanked her profusely, and informed her that I would be working with another teacher. I then sent a letter to all the principals who had submitted names and the other eight teachers who had been selected by their principals as possible participants, informed them that I had found a participant, and thanked both the principals and the teachers for responding to my requests.

Data Collection

When I began my research I first needed to develop a trusting relationship with the teacher of the combined grade and to establish a comfortable relationship with the students in the class. Data collection began the third week in September with an entry in my personal journal describing my first visit to the school and my informal interview with the principal. Data collection occurred over four months beginning in September 2000 and initially involved visiting the classroom twice a week at times mutually agreeable to the participant and the researcher. The content and duration of each session was determined as the study evolved, depending on the specific events, the curriculum taught, and the activities planned for the class during this period of time. This varied from a whole day to a few hours.

My interactions with the children were diverse and wide ranging. Although they were not part of the study, it was impossible to be in a primary classroom and not participate at times. The majority of my time was spent observing the teacher. However, I did at times participate in the classroom activities. I helped the children in language arts or math, I read stories to the children in the reading corner, I played games during centre time, and I contributed to any activity when asked. During physical education I sometimes played with the children if it was appropriate. These occasions provided me with more opportunities to find out what was going on in the classroom and created another context on which to base interviews with the teacher and enhance my field notes.

Several means of data collection were used in the study. The research design was flexible to accommodate other data sources such as teacher journals and/or materials in which such data might inform the study and were agreeable to the participant. Data were collected primarily through taped interviews. This information was critical to the investigation. Two hundred pages of typed transcription were produced. Many audiotaped in-depth interviews were conducted with the teacher. Because the research was focused on an individual teacher in a school, the involvement of other school-based personnel was limited to one formal interview with the principal. Interviews were invaluable for checking with the teacher regarding the meaning of her particular action or my interpretation of what had happened in the classroom. Taping the interview ensured that everything said was preserved for analysis. The tapes provided relevant information about the classroom teacher and important insights into certain occurrences that allowed me to probe further in subsequent interviews. As well, interview questions were developed from observations made in class and from review of the literature in respect to various combined-grade issues. The interview tapes were transcribed and organized chronologically.

Data were also collected during informal conversations. Field notes were taken during conversations and detailed written descriptions of the conversations were completed as soon as possible after the conversation. Each of the observation periods involved a significant amount of informal conversation because it was during these occasions immediately before or following observation times that the teacher explained her position on issues related to her plans for the lesson or the interactions in the classroom. We also held informal e-mail conversations in the times that I was not in the classroom. She shared her reflections on how her planning was having an impact on specific learning outcomes in her classroom. These data were helpful in interpreting and analyzing the activities that occurred within the context of the classroom. Selecting key details from these conversations allowed me to create "verbal snapshots" (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 1997, p. 73) in my written descriptions of the classroom environment.

Observations allowed me to notice things that had perhaps become routine to the teacher and might never have been mentioned by her. It also provided some knowledge of the context or provided specific incidents or behaviors that were used as reference points in subsequent interviews. I attended one staff meeting, not to make an accurate record of everything that occurred, but to get an impression of how the teacher interacted with her colleagues on staff, to obtain a sense of the schools' priorities, and to observe how the staff operated as a group of professionals under the leadership of the principal. Data collected at the meeting were useful in writing the description of the school staff and principal.

Field notes of observations were written in detail as soon as possible after the observation and included descriptions, direct quotations, and personal comments. The notes also included descriptions of the teacher's actions, interactions, teaching and learning activities and resources, processes, and the context of the classroom. Students were not the focus of the data collection, but their involvement in the activities in the classroom formed part of the context of the classroom. The data pertaining to the classroom context included student interactions with the teacher and other students and the learning resources used by teachers and students.

Originally it was not intended to videotape the teacher in the classroom, but my supervisory committee encouraged me to use this method of collecting data. The participant was at first uncomfortable and hesitant about this data-collection method. However, after the research was under way and the study became better realized, together we reevaluated, and the idea of videotaping was discussed, using the stimulated-recall method. I believe that she had a change of heart because she became very comfortable with me, trusted that there would be no evaluation, and had a clear understanding of the method. We decided to videotape during two different periods of time. The book by Gass and Mackey (2000) was shared with the teacher to ensure full understanding of the procedure.

The stimulated-recall sessions were the most time-consuming in terms of equipment setup and preparation. Before showing the taped session to the teacher, I reviewed the process and procedures of stimulated recall. My instructions to the teacher were:

> What we are going to do now is watch the video. I am interested in what you were thinking at the time you are talking about the pictures. I can see what you are doing by looking at the video, but I do not know what you are thinking. What I would like you to do is tell me what you are thinking, what was in your mind at that time while you were teaching. Feel comfortable to keep talking while we are watching. The tape recorder will pick up your voice. As well, I am going to put the remote control on the table here, and you can pause the video any time you want. If you want to stop and tell me something more about what you are thinking, you can push pause. If I have a question about what you were thinking, then I will push pause and ask you to talk about that part of the video.

We chatted for a few more minutes, and I reminded her that the videotaped session would perhaps act as a stimulus, and one might gain access to processes that are unavailable by other means. It was important for me as the researcher to be sensitive to the amount of time needed for the teacher to verbalize on a particular topic during the recall procedure. The teacher talked a great deal about her thoughts and actions during the video. There were 35 typed pages of transcript of the first session and 40 pages of the second session. One example occurred during the first session when we were watching the students quietly working. She said:

> I still really watch carefully. It doesn't look like I was, but I am actually. That sort of impresses me, to see myself doing that, because I was really in my mind thinking, How much longer should I let them go? How much longer are they going to be still quiet? Or is it going to be just another minute and I am going to lose them? I really was very conscious of how much longer I could let them work before it was too hard to get them back. That's something I am always conscious of, especially with certain children. Wow! It looks like I started at the perfect time.

During the second session the teacher was more relaxed and stated that she was learning as much, if not more, about herself and her actions as I was. Each session was completed the same day as the video was made. This was important because I knew from the research that one's memory becomes less accurate as time passes. Garner (1988) reported "in an experiment involving participant retrospection about strategic activity immediately after task completion and two days later, significantly fewer cognitive events were recalled"(p. 89). Each of the stimulated recall sessions was audiotaped and transcribed.

Numerous documents were collected. Planning documents, written reports of events, letters, memos, and other communiqués that the teacher or the school prepared were used to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources. Important examples included the parent handouts that explained questions regarding the combined grade. Some of the documents provided me with information for the study about things that could not be observed. For example, information had been sent out on the first day of school informing parents of the curriculum taught in a combined grade and the supplies needed. This gave me another opportunity to relate the participant's preplanning to the norms and practices that existed within the classroom context.

As the time came to end my data collection, I was worried that there might be some further important data that would lead to a new insight that I would miss. However, I realized that I could bring my research to a close when the interview sessions and informal conversations were not generating any new insights. Patton (1990) stated:

> Over the course of the field work, as one nears completion of data gathering, more and more attention is devoted to matters of interpretation. As the observer becomes more knowledgeable about the setting being observed, as information

> increases, more and more time is devoted to fine-tuning and confirming observed patterns. (p. 265)

I began to go to the classroom less frequently and eventually stopped altogether. This approach worked very well. The children did not participate in the study, but I had developed a positive relationship with the students, and I felt that I was an important part of the classroom. On my last day, which was just before Christmas break, I spoke to the children after my observation. I thanked them for having me in their class and told them that it was my last day in their classroom, but that when the report I was writing about their teacher was finished, I would give her a copy and she could share it with them.

The participant knew that the observations were coming to an end. I had discussed continuing correspondence and sharing my writing with her in the following months, and she was happy to still be part of the study. On the last scheduled day we went out for lunch because we had become good friends.

I believed the various sources provided me as the researcher with an extensive, reliable and thorough means of collecting data.

Data Analysis

The purpose of my analysis was to explore the teacher's understandings of a successful combined-grade classroom. It was a concurrent process of data collection and analysis. Conveying an understanding of the case was the paramount consideration in analyzing the data (Merriam, 1998). Data analysis proceeded in a minor way at the beginning of my regular interviews with the teacher and my observations in the classroom. It was ongoing throughout the research. I began by writing questions and comments in my field notes and tried to reflect on the reaction of the teacher.

The analysis was both interpretive and descriptive. I described the processes, the relationships, the setting and situations, the social organization of the classroom, and the people who were apparent in the study. The accuracy, comprehensiveness, and sensitivity of the description helped form a foundation for the analysis. As I wrote the descriptions, I made meaning of the behaviors revealed and related the data to external considerations such as theories, philosophy, and/or history. The analysis involved explaining, providing insights, clarifying, and understanding complexities that I was observing.

I regularly checked information with my participant in addition to the triangulation between the various forms of data. My advisor, who was not directly involved in the study, raised questions. She met with me at regular intervals to discuss my progress and asked perceptive questions. Although she did not see the data, she probed and made astute observations that helped alert me to various methodological considerations.

As I reread the data I was careful to look for both the details in the data and the broad connections across the data. Some specific questions emerged from this data. These were recorded and followed up in the following weeks. Several e-mails and phone calls to the teacher cleared up my unanswered questions. I valued the teacher's insights and perceptiveness.

Once all the information was compiled, I was faced with numerous pages of observational notes, personal reflections, and a folder full of interview transcripts. I read through all the interview transcripts, observational notes, and personal reflections. Once I had all the data compiled and organized, I could complete the analysis of the data.

In the process of reading and rereading data, I began to think about the categories that were revealed from common ideas presented in the data, some of which were reflected in the literature. This list included such topics as organization, curriculum, and planning. As the categories emerged, I created titles with a name that seemed to best represent the concept being illustrated. I highlighted and classified significant bits of data, then typed succinct annotations with the source interview and page reference. After this was completed, I typed the words and phrases from the preliminary categories on separate sheets and placed them in folders. I was better able to see the distinctions and relationships between them. I was also able to start labeling themes within each category as I read through each of the folders carefully.

Sometimes the categories were words or phrases used by the teacher themselves, but often they were more abstract, denoting more than the example itself. These categories then became the means of sorting the descriptive data I had collected over the four months. In my attempt to make meaning out of the elements of teacher planning in an effective combined classroom, I relied upon my personal and professional knowledge of pedagogy, teacher development, and planning perspectives in relation to a combined grade.

From the data analysis I was able to identify categories that appeared to represent significant aspects of the teacher's pedagogy in the combined classroom: teacher beliefs, parent beliefs, student social development, school context, preplanning, interactive planning, postplanning, and factors (teacher, environment, and students).

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the research design for the study. A brief overview of interpretive research and case study research followed a section on the selection of the, participant and the ethical considerations. Next came a description of the methods used in this research that is, interviews, informal conversations, observations, and videotaping with the stimulated-recall process. Each was described, including an introduction to the method and a brief review of the literature. Data-analysis procedures were detailed. The section on conducting the research discusses how I placed myself within the selection of the participant, the data collection, and the data analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

Introduction

There are many outside influences in a school that affect each classroom, whether it is a combined-grade classroom or a single-grade classroom. Teaching practices can be observed, categorized, and quantified; but the sum of these parts does not fully describe the whole. For me to be able to clearly say what distinguished this combined-grade classroom, it was important to recognize the context of the teacher's work, including the work place, school staff, students, parents, and administration. This chapter describes those outside influences that shaped the classroom context.

The descriptions of the school, the staff, the students, the parents and other resources are based primarily on field notes taken during September and October. The descriptions of the principal and the teacher are primarily based on several interviews conducted over the four-month period, from September to December, when I was in the school.

The School

The elementary school was a two-storey building somewhat hidden by large spruce trees. The school was built of red brick and masonry, with large windows on three sides. It was located in an older established neighborhood with buildings that were built in the early 1950s. Most of the homes in the neighborhood were single-family dwellings, but there were also a small number of walk-up apartment buildings. Many new families had moved into the area and were renovating the older homes or building new homes. A teacher at the school described the parents as "mostly middle class with some upper income groups—teachers, business people, and lawyers."

The school was situated on a fairly busy one-way street with a bike path extending along the length of the street closest to the school. A new playground extended along one side of the school, adjacent to the windowless, blank wall of the gymnasium. The staff parking lot sat well back on the other side of the school. A grassy field stretched behind the school and beside the playground until it reached the iron mesh fence, which provided the demarcation line between field and the road behind the fence. There were single-family dwellings on the other side of the residential road. The grassy field was a large, open, community play field. The school field and the community field appeared as one and provided the children with a large open playground, of which they took full advantage for games and activities of all kinds at recess and during the lunch hour.

The entrance to the school had beautiful brick steps up to wide wooden doors. The foyer was small, with a high, impressive ceiling. As you entered, the impression was of attractive spaciousness. The school's mission statement on a poster that contrasted with the general color scheme greeted all parents and visitors as they entered. The message on the poster read:

> We believe that all students can achieve academic success in a safe and supportive environment. We know that academic achievement is facilitated when . . .
>
> Each student is valued
> Each student is encouraged to do his or her best
> The growth and success of all of our students is celebrated
> Students are encouraged to be active participants in their own learning
> Learning is conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect and responsible behavior.

In the front foyer, plaques, certificates of awards, and athletic trophies were displayed to proclaim the school and students' successful quest for excellence.

The school had some of the desirable features of modern schools, although it had been opened in 1940. It was roomy, well planned, colorful, and bright. On one side of the entrance was a small, new, carpeted administration area with an office for the principal and a small, new workstation for the secretary. An extra office for conferences, a comfortably appointed staff room, and a well-equipped staff workroom were also included at the front of the school on the other side of the front entrance.

The school had 16 classrooms, eight on each floor. A hallway with two banks of lockers for the students' outside clothes led to a large and well-equipped gymnasium attached to the back of the school. Other school facilities included a well-planned small library on the second floor, an infirmary or 'health room,' a science room complete with sinks and other basic science instructional equipment, a two-tiered music room filled with a variety of Orff instruments, and a classroom with large tables converted into a lunchroom.

Classrooms and hallway floors were all polished hardwood. A few professional paintings, parent-information bulletin boards, and several displays of children's artwork were located along the hallway walls. The displays and bulletin boards combined with the common practice of leaving classroom doors open gave the school a sense of friendly purposefulness.

The school day began at 8:30 a.m. for the teachers, and classes began at 8:45 a.m. The morning recess went from 10:15 a.m. until 10:30 a.m., and the morning session broke for lunch for students and staff at 11:30 a.m. The lunch break was one hour and 15 minutes long to allow enough time for the students who walked home for lunch. The afternoon session resumed at 12:45 p.m. The 15-minute afternoon recess began at 2:15 p.m., and the school day concluded at 3:30 p.m.

The Staff

A female principal led the school. In addition, there were nine female teaching staff, three male teaching staff, one female secretary, one male custodian, one female custodial assistant, and one female program aide. The school health nurse provided immunization shots, information for parents and staff and home visits for those families who teachers believed needed some assistance. Among the staff were a library technician and teacher specialists in physical education, science, music, and French. A team of educational specialists, including a school psychologist, social worker, and reading specialist, provided service for students who had special needs. Special additional support was available to students requiring this service. Several students at this school had been identified as requiring special-needs programming. Individualized plans and instruction strategies were prepared for the teachers of these children, and their parents were kept informed of the specific details throughout the year.

The local health authority supplied the services of a speech therapist, when necessary. Referrals were made through the school, assessment followed, and an appropriate program was recommended to both parents and school. The principal provided counseling. Problems affecting the happiness and positive development of every child were addressed either through the school's efforts or through referrals made to outside agencies. The children at the school were encouraged to approach any staff member concerning their problems, and parents were also asked to contact the principal if they felt that their child needed assistance.

The Students

The student population was comprised of 246 students from kindergarten to Grade 6. The kindergarten program had a morning and afternoon class. There was one single grade at each grade level, three combined-grade classrooms (Grades 1 and 2, Grades 3 and 4, and Grades 5 and 6). The mandated Alberta curriculum was taught to every student, and all year-four to year-six students received instruction in French as a second language. This involved their participation in French language instruction for 120-150 minutes weekly.

The school served the students of the community neighborhood as well as three other neighborhoods, of which two were physically close to the community. The majority of the students lived within walking distance of the school, but a small group was bussed from one of the older residential neighborhoods because that area did not have a community elementary school. Most of the students appeared to come from stable, warm, caring home environments.

The Parents

There was an active school council at the school. The executive consisted of the school administration, members of the community, and parents of children attending the school. The purpose of the council was to improve communication between school, parents, and the community and to provide support services in the school. The council usually met the second Wednesday of every month. As well, there was a School Parent Association. This incorporated nonprofit society was the fund-raising arm of the School

Council. The objective of the School Parent Association was to raise funds to enhance and foster the academic, social, and physical development of all of the schools students. The society's meetings were held in conjunction with the School Council meetings.

Other Resources

The YMCA After-School and Out-of-School Care for students was provided from 7:00 a.m. to school time, during lunch hour, and after school until 6:00 p.m. Approximately 20 students attended. The program was located in a separate building situated adjacent to the staff parking lot.

In addition to those students who attended the YMCA lunch program, there were approximately 50 students who attended the school lunchroom program. Two paid supervisors were responsible for the students' behavior and ensured that the students finished their lunches. Families of students attending the lunchroom program paid for this service. Information and registration forms were available for all students on request at the school office. The students brought their own lunches. Two microwave ovens were provided in the lunchroom so that students could bring food to be warmed up. In an interview with the principal about lunchtime activities, she stated:

> We don't as a rule have activities during the lunch hour only because then it makes it really difficult for the supervisors. What happens is, the kids who don't normally stay for lunch want to participate in the activities and therefore have to bring their lunch. This means the teacher has to supervise the whole time, not just for the activity, but also the eating time. What we do that works well because a lot of students live close to the school, we have after-school activities. The clubs after school are lacrosse, line dancing, art, writing, and running. Teachers believe in students enriching their education with extra activities and willingly and enthusiastically volunteer to run the clubs. Teachers said that it is not a lot of planning and preparing; it is the fun time with the kids, so it is something we don't want to give up. This was decided at the first staff meeting in late August. Teachers expressed an interest in particular areas. I had to caution the staff about volunteering for too many clubs.

The Principal

The principal had been at the school for four years. She was knowledgeable about curriculum and had a special education and business background. She communicated well with her staff and had a low-key, semiformal approach to her staff meetings. She believed that her staff was 'incredible.' The school staff was, on the whole, a young staff. The teachers expressed their opinions openly during discussions at the staff meeting. The business agenda was dealt with in an efficient manner, with much evidence of pleasantness and goodwill. What was obvious at the staff meeting was that with most items on the agenda, the staff focused first on how it would affect the students (Researcher journal, November 17th). From my observations at one meeting in October I felt that the staff respected and liked working with each other. Teachers initiated projects and volunteered to help in all areas. The friendly spirit of cooperation among the teachers contributed a great deal to the happy atmosphere of the school. Further evidence of 'school spirit' was supplied at the front of the school. T-shirts with the school logo on the front were for sale, and on T-shirt day almost all of the teachers and students came to school in T-shirts bearing the school logo. The principal planned to buy all the staff vests with the school logo on them for Christmas.

In the previous spring the principal had discussed with all staff their preferences in their teaching assignments. For the most part, teachers were assigned the grade or grades they wanted to teach. The principal explained her organization of combined grades:

> Part of the decision was based on just the number of students at certain grade levels. There were too many students for one grade, and we did not want to have classes of over thirty. However, we also looked at the needs of the students; the benefits would be there for certain children to be in a combined class. We had

> high-achieving Grade Threes that had huge leadership potential but had been expressing their skills in a way that was not appropriate. Placing them with the Grade Fours has made a big difference in how they are behaving. As well, the lower Grade Fours are benefiting from hearing the Grade Three curriculum again. The reason I planned for combined grades is really a combination of necessity of numbers, the budget, and programming needs of the students. It was the same in Grades One and Two and Grades Five and Six. Teachers were very involved in the placement of students.

New staff was hired to replace staff that transferred or retired. Teachers were accorded considerable freedom in their timetabling and in their choice of learning activities and materials. The school was not only a place where they worked, but also a place where they enjoyed their work and enjoyed the companionship of their colleagues and, to a large extent, their students.

The principal described herself as a person "committed to student learning." She believed that all staff should work as a team focused on improving student achievement. As a result of analyzing the provincial Achievement Tests and the district's Highest Level of Achievement Writing Tests from the previous year, the school staff and administration created a school wide focus on writing. Much of their budgeted professional development money and a great deal of energy was focused on selecting inservices that had to do with writing and writing across the curriculum in other subject areas. At each staff meeting, time was provided for teachers to share classroom strategies and activities that they were using in their classrooms to teach writing in all subject areas. At the beginning of the year the teachers had decided that there would be three schoolwide writing projects based on schoolwide themes. This would provide assessment information and a way to demonstrate student growth in writing. Student work would be published and highlighted in a variety of ways.

The principal attempted to provide more than the specified programs at the school to meet the individual needs of students and to provide some surprises. This was illustrated when she spoke at length about a new program that they had implemented at the school this year, the *Safe & Caring Schools* project. This project was aligned directly with the health curriculum:

> It is not that we had terrible behavior issues, but we had some playground problems such as horseplay, play fighting, and some teasing and bullying. As well, this year, which worried me, we inherited about 20 new children, and they came from all backgrounds with a lot of baggage.

In line with her beliefs and definition of teamwork, she involved all of her staff, her lunchroom supervisors, and a member of the school council in the all-day workshop on the *Safe & Caring Schools* program.

> It has changed the feeling and atmosphere in the school. Parents watch what they are doing because an important aspect of the program is adult modeling. Teachers are also more aware of the language they are using. For example, they no longer say to each other, "Can I steal this from you for a minute?" The word *steal* in our school now has a different connotation. The first month this year was a very trying month to get the new students' behaviors changed. Now you would not recognize them. Students now come into the office for bags to clean up the schoolyard. The project has established a nice tone in the school. Our discipline policy describes the offenses clearly and the consequences of committing these offenses. When a student committed a minor offense, he or she received a phone call to his or her parents and was required to fill out a sheet that described the incident, the rule that was broken, and what the student would do the next time the situation occurred. This sheet is called a *think paper* and is sent home for a parent signature. When a student committed a major misconduct, the parent was informed and students either served an in-school suspension or an out-of-school suspension. To date I have given out only one think paper and have dealt with no major misconducts. I just feel the language with the kids, and the kids' talking amongst themselves, has made the difference.

Surprises were something more visual and concrete that just gave the children a little boost. Names of students who were observed by any staff member "doing something safe and caring" were put into a draw, and each month at the assembly 10 names were drawn out. They had lunch with the principal the next day.

The Teacher

The central figure in this study is Alison, who taught a combined Grade 1 and 2 class at the elementary school. Her activities, methodologies, approaches, and pedagogy of and in the classroom are the focus of this study.

Alison

Alison was in her late 30s. She and her husband, an elementary teacher who also worked for a large urban school district, had one daughter in Grade 1 and had taught for 16 years. She had majored in special education at the University of Alberta. She started her first year of teaching at a fairly isolated Indian Reserve in Onion Lake, north of Lloydminster, where she had taught for two years.

> This was an interesting but frustrating experience. The environment the students lived in was very different from what I had known. The students did not attend regularly, and it was very difficult to maintain any continuity of programming. I left because I was very tired of seemingly endless student and family personal problems. However, I really feel I learned a great deal from this experience.

Alison came back to the city, was a substitute teacher for several years, and then received a long-term assignment at an elementary school in large urban school district teaching special-needs students. She then moved to an early education program, but the first year was as a speech and language aide. She attained a position as a teacher in the school's early education program, where she stayed for four years. "The students at this school and in this program were very young and had various disabilities. They were really high needs, with toileting, feeding, and a lot of medical problems."(Interview #3)

Since that time she had taught regular grades in one other school in the large urban district, and she had been at her current school for nine years. At this school she had taught combined grades for three years, although not sequentially. She described herself as a good teacher and explained her role as a facilitator of learning, creating an atmosphere for student growth. She preferred and enjoyed working with the younger students, creating learning situations that taught students the skills they needed to become productive members of society. More specifically, she delighted in teaching a child to read, to enjoy reading, and to use reading as a tool to achieve other things, to write, to spell, and to be competent in the mathematical basics. Her beliefs were demonstrated in her classroom when students were involved in activities that extended learning beyond the classroom and led to the development of thinking and problem solving. The social interactions, students' working and talking together in her classroom, helped the students make sense of ideas and concepts. Her timetable also reflected her viewpoint. Every morning a large block of time was scheduled for math and language arts. She integrated these subjects into science, health, and social studies. Alison believed that her special education background helped her with all students:

> I think maybe you have a little bit more patience and empathy for the kids and their sort of individual needs, and also if there are kids that have some disabilities in my class, I am familiar with them, so I can deal with the implications to their learning probably better than someone who is not familiar with their disability. For example, there is a girl at this school that has autistic-like behaviors that I recognized immediately. She was in my Grade Two class a few years ago. I know the teacher from the year before shared that she was such a problem in her class, and the teacher admitted she did not know how to deal with her. When she was in my class she behaved well and worked well. I believe that my experience just makes it easier to reach these students, as I know the strategies that will work and my expectations are more realistic.

Alison knew that being an effective teacher was more than having her students successfully meet the goals of education as outlined in the mandated curricula. Some parents in the community seemed to have little time to teach their children values or manners. Alison felt that it was important to teach the children to be responsible, respectable, and caring citizens:

> Each year I am faced with unique challenges. For some students I have to try and provide some of the things they don't get at home. What works in one situation may not work in another. I expect to be a counselor, a mother, a doctor, and a lawyer and to do all sorts of other things. I do not really feel that this takes away too much from my teaching; it is now just part of the job. In my classroom I can make a difference. For example, at the end of September I noticed that most of my students were becoming more responsible for their work and did not always have to be told what to do. They are learning some good habits. I can influence the children to have a good attitude towards school, show interest in what we are doing in class, and have a willingness to learn. Children should like and enjoy school, and this means providing a supportive classroom environment. As a teacher I need to know my students and really know what their needs are. I need to be able to relate to their schoolwork and the happenings in their individual families.

I observed Alison for many hours and saw that her interactions with the students were gentle and showed concern for their problems. For example, one morning Luke came into the room upset and in tears and said, "My mom didn't give me a hug and a kiss." Alison stopped what she was doing, bent down, and hugged and kissed him. He was smiling as he went to his desk. Alison was fully aware of the teaching practice and could explain what was done and why it was done. She explained that she just knew this was the best course of action to take under the circumstances, because she needed him to be able to concentrate on his schoolwork for the day. Practical reasoning provides a means of "transforming the tacit quality of the teacher's knowing to a level of awareness that opens the possibility for reflective consideration" (Fenstermacher, 1994, p. 45).

Fenstermacher indicated that the "good reasons approach" provides another way of justifying practical knowledge and teacher understandings.

In alignment with the *Safe & Caring Schools* project, one of Alison's goals was for her students to "be better sharing and caring friends." These values were reflected in the fostering of respect for one another, for property, and for the community at large. She encouraged students to help each other with their work:

> I want them to work as a team in my classroom, and I try to foster this feeling in everything that we do. It is important in all classrooms, but is particularly important in a combined grade. I work on facilitating closeness between the students and myself and between each and every student. This year in my combined class I use themes. They make the learning interesting and meaningful. I am continually adding new songs, stories, and poems, as well as art, science, social studies, and math activities to their thematic units and studies of special days and events. A theme-based approach allows more flexibility and enables me to more easily align two grade level curricula.

The idea of reinforcing a close feeling with and among her students and her approach to learning promoted respect, helping, and participation and helped to build a foundation for the teacher's decision making and classroom organization.

The Classroom

The classroom was a square of approximately 20 feet. As I entered the room I was immediately confronted with color and light. The general impression of the classroom was brightness and activity. The large displays of children's work and the enormous amount of special items for children to read and observe combined to suggest that children and their ideas were both valued and encouraged in this classroom. On the side wall a blackboard was filled with displays which focused on topics such as the students' birthdays, the calendar, the seasons, words and poems about their current theme, a poster with the star students' names on it, color words, a health poster, a science diagram about the properties of water, a number line that circled the whole room, a thermometer, and two charts, one with "Author of the Month" and one with words that begin with the letter they were currently studying. In the corner of this wall was the teacher's bookshelf, filled to capacity with books and boxes identified as language arts units.

Windows spanned the wall at the front of the classroom. The ledge below the window featured beans and geraniums that seemed to be thriving in the direct sunlight. Some were just starting to sprout and some were in flower. As well, some of the children's three-dimensional art was interspersed on the ledge. Beneath the ledge was a two-tiered shelf filled with children's books, textbooks, workbooks, room folders, reference materials, and more charts with seasonal poems. The wall on the other side contained the word wall. Spelling and reading words were arranged alphabetically, and words were added every week. There were also displays of word patterns. In one corner of this wall was a chart with "hard" words. When students thought of or came upon a long, difficult word, the teacher wrote it on the chart. Below the word wall was more shelving with numerous resources and games.

On the back wall was the blackboard where the agenda for the day was displayed. Below the blackboard were chart paper with different kinds of questions and a shelving unit with the students' subject duotangs, their homework sheets, and extra paper. The top section of the blackboard displayed the letters of the alphabet, and on the end of the blackboard was the flag of Canada. Beside the blackboard was a blue table with mailboxes handmade from milk cartons that held information to take home, their journals, and a basket full of books for students to sign out and take home. Many of the displays were changed periodically to follow the current theme. The themes during the period of this study featured autumn, Thanksgiving, Halloween, Remembrance Day, and Christmas.

The arrangement of students' desks was changed three times during the time of the study. They were first in parallel rows, then in groups of twos and threes, and finally in a semicircle facing the board. The Grade 1s and 2s were mixed together in each of the seating arrangements. When I asked Alison about the changes, she said:

> I did not like the other seating arrangements for some of the kids. I just changed them so they would be beside someone who is a positive influence on them, and I think I like the way they are now. It seems to work out really well. It is also more functional. It is easier to use the overhead or films. No one has to move his or her desk, less disruption.

The wooden desks were the old-fashioned kind, built in one unit with the seat attached. There was no place for storage. In the northeast corner behind the students' desks was the teacher's desk. On one side of the room was a large rectangular table utilized as a preparation or work area for tasks such as the art projects and the collection of student work. A large, round table in the corner was utilized for individualized work with the Grade 1s. The setting suggested that whole-class lesson presentations occurred at the front of the room and individual work and small-group preparations at the side and in the corner.

The Students

There were 24 students in Alison's combined Grade 1 and 2 classroom. They ranged in age from six to seven years of age. Observations suggested that the students represented a normal spread of heights and weights, and it was impossible to tell which students were in Grade 1 or Grade 2. Only one student was a member of a visible minority group. Three students were in homes with only one parent. The children were carefully chosen for the combined grade. The kindergarten teacher chose students who were more mature, had good ability, and could work well independently. The Grade 1 teacher chose students who could work well independently and in most cases needed some extra help with the Grade 1 concepts. Alison said:

> I have been very impressed since I have been at this school with the way that the teachers get together in June and organize the students for the next year. They are very conscientious about where the kids are going and whom they can work well with in the class. If there were problems with two students, they really try to separate them. Parent requests to some extent are looked at, but it is mostly the teacher who do a really, really good, professional job of placing the children where they will be the best.

She described the students as generally achieving a high standard.

A Typical Day in Alison's Class

As the bell to enter school rang, the students in Alison's class went to their lockers, took off their outside clothes, and changed to their inside shoes. They chattered and laughed about various home and school events as they walked towards the classroom. Alison greeted them at the door with a smile and a personal comment to most of them. Students placed their binders on the desk, and Alison reminded them to take out their homework sheets and place them on their desks. One student took the stickers off the teacher's desk and put stickers on all the homework pages and then collected them and put them into the homework basket. The students who had not finished left them in their binders to complete that night.

Some Grade 6 students went for buddy reading with the Grade 1 students every morning. The other students sat down at their desks or on the carpet and took out a book to read or look at. Alison walked around the room, selecting certain books for students and asking others to read a bit. Every morning began with silent reading time except for

Fridays, when they wrote in their journals. When the Grade 1students returned, Alison clapped her hands and sang, "Clean up, clean up" to a made up melody, and students put their books away and prepared for instructions.

While she was walking around with the books, the Grade 2 students were given a language arts assignment at their desks and the Grade 1 students had a language arts assignment placed at their table. Language arts activities were usually literature based and consisted of such activities as listening and/or responding to a piece of children's literature, peer-editing their responses, responding to comprehension questions, or working on a grammar sheet. During each term the students studied an author in depth and also worked on a specific, usually seasonal theme.

While Alison worked with the Grade 1students on their assignment, the Grade 2 students who were working independently at their desks were asked to work with partners. Sometimes Alison had them check their work with each other so that they could see the work done by their partner and compare their results, or she had them just help each other. At other times she allowed them to choose to work alone and put no stipulation on helping others. During both activities Alison was visually monitoring all the students and interjecting positives about their behavior. After the direct teaching with the Grade 1students was completed, they continued with the assignment. Alison then checked up on the other group. As the students finished, they were free to go to the reading corner and quietly read with each other or play a game and wait for calendar time.

Calendar time was Alison's way of reinforcing number concepts and working on oral presentations. Each day a student was chosen to lead the lesson. The student began with, "Boys and girls, what day is it today?" Hands went up and the student chose someone to come up and put the date on the calendar. Weather was discussed in the same manner and marked on a chart and a thermometer. When the student was finished, Alison read a story that related to the theme or author they were working on. The students were engrossed in all her stories as her voice and facial expressions changed constantly.

When the children returned from recess they engaged in mathematical activities. Students sat at their desks and received direct instruction about the concept to be taught or reviewed for the day. Students were grouped heterogeneously. There were five centres around the room with various activities at each one. Students went to one centre a day. The activities and the skills at the centres were aligned with the current theme. Alison worked with all the groups, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes reteaching the concept. At other times Alison taught the two grades separately, with different activities for each grade level.

Music was often taught in the morning after recess. On these days mathematics was reduced accordingly. A music specialist who taught songs and rhythmic patterns in the music room taught the same material to both grades. She differentiated by giving the older students instruments to play while they were singing.

In the last few minutes before lunch the students did their daily fast math. Individualized sheets had been placed on their desks while they were at music. Alison allowed two minutes to demonstrate their skill in a simple addition or subtraction. When the time was up, the students deposited their sheets in the marking basket. The signal for lunchtime was the reciting of the poem "Alligator Pie." The poem was changed as soon as they had all memorized it.

Every afternoon began with silent writing time. Students took out their folders and worked independently on their pieces of writing. They were either writing a new piece or editing and polishing a piece for publishing.

Physical education was in the afternoon four times a week. When I was observing, students were working on activities with beanbags and balls, and they played a game that was similar to dodge ball. Physical education was held both indoors and outdoors, depending on the weather. During the fall they were working on soccer skills, and just before Christmas they were skating once or twice a week.

Science was related to the outcome being studied and consisted of either large-group instruction or small-group learning opportunities. It was done in blocks of time regularly every afternoon. This happened for six weeks, and then social studies was taught in a block of time for the next six week. Science was usually done in the science room, because the equipment was convenient. Generally, one or two science-unit demonstrations or hands-on experiments were done as a whole group, with different grade levels receiving and doing different related activities. The nature of the science curriculum did not lend itself very well to integration. Therefore Alison taught, demonstrated, or did hands-on activities with one group while the others did seat work at their desks. The following day Alison taught, demonstrated, or did hands-on activities with a different grade level.

At the end of each day it was a read-aloud story, and once a week it was sharing time and a story. One student per week was asked to bring four things hidden in a bag that reflected his or her interests. The student kept these treasures secret if they could. Each student whose week it was seemed excited about this activity all afternoon. The student who was sharing was assigned to write at least three questions for each of the items brought that would give students clues as to what the items might be.

As they prepared to leave for the day, the students needed to put their new homework sheet in their binder as well as any other information that needed to go home to their parents. Alison checked all the students' binders before they left and gave them a positive message about their day at school.

These activities represent an overview of the type of activities that took place in Alison's classroom.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the context in which this study took place. This background knowledge should help to increase our understanding of the findings from the researcher in the subsequent chapters. The sections described in this chapter are the school, the staff, the parents, the students, the principal, the teacher, and her classroom. The final section described the typical daily activities of the teacher that children experienced as part of life in the classroom.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION RELATED TO A TEACHER'S PLANNING IN A COMBINED GRADE

This chapter presents an in-depth discussion of the findings related to the research question underlying the study. The chapter has two major divisions related to the interview questions used in this study. These divisions are types of teacher planning, and factors that influenced planning in a combined grade classroom. Data will be presented from the perspective of the combined-grade teacher in the study. A clearer understanding of how the teacher does her work in a combined grade is revealed. Individuals have "their own interpretation, their understanding of the context in which they work that provides a framework for their actions and thoughts" (Knight, 1991, p. 64).

Types of Teacher Planning in a Combined Grade

This section presents the findings related to the types of planning the teacher engaged in. The section has three major divisions. These divisions are preplanning, interactive planning, and postplanning. Data will be presented from the perspective of the combined-grade teacher participating in the study. The preplanning section contains findings related to her purposes for preplanning, classroom organization, curriculum, and students; the interactive section contains findings related to teacher thoughts while teaching; and the postplanning section contains findings related to teacher reflections on the preplanning and the interactive planning.

Preplanning

Alison felt that preplanning was key to successful learning in her classroom. She said:

> I think the more you plan, the less stress you have and the more successful you are. Quite frankly, when I think of the times when I get to school in a rush and am not as prepared, I know that usually the day is not going to be great. The kids seem to sense that you are not as prepared, and they get uptight. (Interview #2)

Classroom Organization

During the last week of August I phoned Alison just to find out how her summer had been and to reintroduce myself. She had already been at the school for four days during the previous two weeks working about two or three hours each day. She seemed dedicated to preparing her classroom for the students' arrival. When I spoke with her she had her materials organized for her first theme in the fall. She had been talking with the other teachers at the school who were also getting ready to start. She said it was an excellent time to work together and plan with her Division One colleagues because there were no students or meetings. They discussed the topics they were going to teach and shared resources (Fieldnotes, August 20th) She also said that she had started working on her long-range plans. She explained that they took a while to do with a combined grade:

> I start my yearly or long-range plans and check my unit plans in the summer before I come back to school. Then my daily or weekly plans are simple. I spend more time planning daily, but I don't go ahead and plan weekly unless we have a project that we are working on. My daily plans are most important to me, but I don't spend a lot of time planning ahead in great detail. I have just found that most of the time it does not work out. You spend a lot of time planning for stuff that is not going to happen. I always have a general idea in my mind, and I know what I want to do this week. I have certain routines and a theme, and I just work within that framework in my daily plans. (Interview #2)

Alison used a thematic approach for her long-range planning. She felt that this approach worked very well in a combined grade. She said, "My themes are planned out for the year. Some of the themes I use I have done in the past and some of them are new" (Interview #9).

As the first day of school approached, Alison said that even though she was an experienced combined-grade teacher, she always got a little nervous. After the first day she observed:

> I was excited about meeting the new faces and personalities and knew that the children would be either just as excited as I was or more so. The classroom was all in order, and my plans for that day were very clear and specific. My plan was to have lots of activities, as the students after the summer would not be used to sitting and concentrating for any length of time. I was pleased how the first day went. The students were great. (Interview #1)

During the first week of school Alison's timetable was confirmed. She organized her own timetable as most elementary teachers do. One restriction she had on her timetable was that she was mandated by Alberta Learning to adhere to the suggested amount of teaching time for each subject; however, there was a range of the number of minutes required in each subject. Her timetable was then submitted to the principal. At this particular school the principal organized the music schedule after consulting with the music teacher and then assigned the physical education times for each grade.

> When I did my timetable I stuck to the tried and true formula with language arts usually in the morning and math usually in the morning too, because the children are just a bit fresher and you can get more things done. Science and social are in the afternoon. I guess I planned in sort of the traditional way. (Interview #2)

Alison felt that it was too bad that everyone could not have choices in the physical education and music time. Teachers always seemed to want the same times, but Alison certainly was not upset about this (Researcher Journal, September 20th). The way the timetable for these subjects was decided appeared to be just the way it had always been, and the teachers just accepted this method of organization:

> I don't plan when to have physical education or music. I hand in my wishes and then the principal looks at them all, does the best she can, and slots them into the school timetable. We don't have any choice. I tried to get my physical education time in sort of a pattern, but it did not work out with the other teachers' schedules, so my times are just kind of whenever. (Interview #2)

September was always an extremely busy time for all teachers. There were so many things that must be done. The Meet the Teacher evening was always one of the first whole-school events, and teachers usually planned to have this event as soon as possible after the start of school. The purpose of the evening was to meet the parents and discuss the curriculum expectations. Teachers also may discuss their discipline policy and other routine happenings in their particular classroom. It was not a time to talk with the teacher about specific students. Teachers felt that if they had this event very early in September, the parents would understand that they could not talk to them about their child specifically because they had not had a chance to really know them (Researcher Journal, September 29th). Alison shared her procedures on this evening:

> I am well planned for the first parent meeting, particularly in a combined grade. I do a short presentation outlining my classroom routines and procedures. After the presentation parents have time to walk around and see their child's desk. I make sure my long-range plans are visible for everyone to see. I also have my website up on the computer, and I give those sites to my parents to have a look. This way, if they have any further questions after the evening or at any other time, they may be able to be answered on the site as I try very hard to keep it updated. I have all the units, my long-range plans, and a monthly calendar on the site. If it is not answered on the website or not clear to them, they can email or phone after school. A good majority of my parents do not have computers. However, I feel for those that do it is a good way to communicate. So far nobody has inundated me with emails or phone calls. (Interview #9)

When asked about her organizational skills, she said, "When I teach a combined grade it does truly test my organizational skills and my planning skills. I am being a little hard on myself, but I don't worry about that" (Interview #1).

In talking with Alison I realized that she actually considered herself a very organized person, even though she sometimes criticized herself. It was a personal characteristic that was particularly important to her. Everything I saw in her classroom demonstrated her great organization and planning. She said that she consciously tried to achieve a balance between her personal life and professional life. This took a great deal of organization.

Our discussion about her organizational skills took place after we had watched the first stimulated recall session. She seemed a little apprehensive about this question and said that maybe when I was observing what was happening in the classroom, it sometimes might look disorganized. I sensed that she felt that there was something in the time we videotaped that looked unorganized (Researcher Journal, September 27th). Alison began talking about the session as soon as the video started:

> Here I am at the beginning of the day. I feel organized and ready to start. We begin with our morning routines. We do our attendance. I collect anything that needs to be collected. Today it was field trip forms. I had placed their journals on their desks before school started so they could start writing as soon as they got settled. You can see they are all at their desks working while I am finishing the routine business. However, look what happens. You can see in the video it soon became unorganized. Luke had a problem from the day before, and he wanted to share. I thought it was best to deal with the issues right away, so I did, and then we got back to work. Like I said, you have to be organized, but I guess what I forgot to add is that you have to also be willing to sacrifice a little bit of that plan sometimes. (Stimulated-recall interview #7)

During my observations I noted that Alison did not arrive really early in the morning, nor did she stay late after school very often. I could not figure out how she could appear so well planned. We had talked about her planning a number of times, but I still could not see how she could be such an organized teacher. Finally, during one of our discussions it became clearer to me. She said:

> I don't stay late at night. I just make sure I know in my mind what we need to do the next day, and having things set up in centres is good for that as well, because I just know I have already planned. I come in every Sunday. That is my day to plan. I am here for maybe three or four hours, and I prepare and plan for the whole following week. I have all four centre ideas ready for Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday; and I am all prepared for the language arts activity for both Grade One and Grade Two. The activities are prepared around the theme. I also prepare the math concepts I am going to work on. Sundays, I basically get the week prepared. (Interview #4)

Later as we were talking I asked whether she had to go in on Sundays because it was so much more work in a combined grade:

> I don't mind coming on Sundays. I like the peace and quiet in the school, and I am not tired. I have been doing that on Sundays for a few years, and nothing has changed with the combined grade this year. It is the way I need to do it for my family. (Interview #4)

Alison viewed planning as providing her with something concrete to follow. It gave her a sense of comfort and security and enabled her to feel as if she had control over what took place in the classroom. It gave her a purpose and a focus to guide her practice. She had a wide repertoire of techniques and was able to skillfully use these techniques to meet the changing demands in a combined classroom. She spoke briefly about one of her ongoing strategies for teaching language arts:

> When I plan I have to go through all my resources and unit plans, figure out what relates to the curricula and make sure that the activities are aligned with the curricula. For example, this year when I went through the material I had to rethink all of my author-of-the-month activities I had used in previous years and decide if I needed to plan any new units. I first picked out the ones that would integrate into both grade level expectations. Then I talked with the librarian about purchasing two new novel studies written by Canadian authors for Grade One and Grade Two. (Interview #5)

It appeared that an important part of Alison's planning process was to review the materials that she already had, as a way to check that she had not overlooked anything prior to starting the year or the theme for the month. I believed that Alison's account reflected her past expertise with teaching a combined grade in that she appeared to use her experiences with events to revise her approach to planning which, enabled her to continue to be solidly prepared in anticipation of the unexpected (Reflective Journal, November, 17th).

A teacher's ability to attend to a multitude of teaching activities while simultaneously keeping mental track of students' performance requires a great deal of practice and experience. The issue of knowing that the students had to finish the grade level curriculum was always a concern. She revealed what she did to make sure that she was on track:

> I always go back and check my long-range plans. I really want to make sure that I am moving quickly enough to cover everything. I find that I might spend too much time on an area, and I need to move along little bit faster so that I am finishing the unit and leaving enough time for the remainder of what I have got planned. I think I change my short-range plans maybe a little more often in my daily work. If I see that on some sort of topic they are not keen, I might go to something else or spend some time on areas where I know that the majority is having trouble. Just because it is written down does not mean it is in stone; I can change it as the year goes on. (Interview #10)

During my weekly classroom observations I often had the opportunity to witness the students finishing their assignments at different times. At the beginning of the year this happened often, which I suspected was because the Grade 1s were new to the routines of school whereas the Grade 2s were more experienced. I did notice that the number of students finishing work at different times became fewer as the weeks progressed (Reflective Journal, November, 22nd). Alison described her planning process for these potential difficult times:

> I always plan activities to do when they are done their work. It does not matter if you have a combined grade or a regular grade. Usually it is a review of something we have already learned. I train them to know where to get the extra work. This is why it is better to be experienced in a combined grade: You have all the stuff in your head as to how to extend an activity. You always have to plan ahead, especially in a combined grade. Some kids are so speedy, and some just take forever. You must have extra activities planned or you really get into trouble, and students naturally start misbehaving. (Interview #7)

There were times when I saw that Alison had to think on her feet in response to an unexpected result. She always found a way to use this unanticipated event to support the objective of the lesson. She said:

> There have been times during the day when, oops, I don't have anything actually planned because the students have finished faster that I thought or something else unexpected has happened. But with my experience I have a box that I have put the extra stuff that I am not going to use in teaching the unit, but that certainly aligns with the curriculum. This is where my experience certainly helps. (Interview #9)

After a month into the school year and regular visits to the classroom I continued to be constantly impressed by the way that Alison worked in the classroom (Reflective Journal, November 4th). I always observed from her desk and never seemed to be in her way. I asked her if she ever relaxed or sat down while she was teaching:

> During the day I am very busy. I think it is just me, but I don't ever sit down. I don't ever take phone calls unless it is an emergency. You have little enough time in the day; you cannot waste any of the kids' learning time. If the kids are busy working I water plants, check on the reading books, write notes to parents and put them in the kids' backpacks. Lots of little busy things that must be done daily to keep on top of things. (Interview #6)

When asked if she could think of any other times that she planned, she responded:

> I do some of my planning driving to work. Like today, I was trying to think of when we would have art. It is scheduled in the morning, but I realized that it was

> going to take too long and we would have to wait and do it last in the day. This would actually work better and give us more time to finish. (Interview # 7)

> I also do some extra planning at home. Some nights I will sit down and jot a few notes to myself about plans for the next day or gather some materials for an activity we are planning. The notes are not particularly organized they are usually just for myself. (Interview #1)

During the month of November Alison got sick and was away for a week. She notified me right away, and I did not observe during that week. When she returned, we discussed her illness. When teachers have a substitute, they often leave detailed plans. I asked Alison if it was more difficult to plan lessons for a substitute in the combined class:

> When I leave plans for a substitute I usually do them at home and fax them to the school. They take quite a while. I have to write out activities in detail, you know: Here are what the Grade Ones need to do and what the Grade Twos need to do. I actually phoned her, just to check and see if the plans were clear. It is more difficult to be away with a combined grade. The substitute mentioned at one point that she found it very difficult keeping the Ones busy while the Twos were doing this and that. It is difficult to explain to another person exactly what you do. When you have taught a combined grade for a while you just know how to manage the children, and they are used to you as well. The substitute made the comment to me that I certainly had my hands full with planning to keep the two grade levels on track and busy. (Interview #5)

We had talked about the need for planning when the teacher was away, and I asked Alison if there were any other times outside the long-range plans and the daily plans for her lessons. As I got to know Alison I realized that much of what the students did was because of her teaching, and it appeared to come naturally to her without a great deal of thinking. Therefore, some questions such as this one about other kinds of planning took her some time and a great deal of thought to answer:

> Oh yes, now I can remember. I also have to plan ahead when parent volunteers are going to be in my class. I try at the beginning of the year to get the parent to come at regular times, but, of course, it does not always work. I also try to plan

> easy things to do; that way I don't have to explain a lot which I do not have time for when I am teaching. (Interview #8)

Despite the fact that Alison was an experienced combined-grade teacher, every year she planned thoroughly, somewhat as she had when she was in her first years of teaching. Her planning reflected her expert knowledge of students and teaching. She was very familiar with the subject matter and knew what activities to select. The information she had on the students in her classroom provided a guide for planning future lessons. Alison's skills and knowledge were demonstrated in her accounts of her preplanning.

Curriculum

The preplanning of the curriculum for both grades was a challenge that Alison felt was a most important area for all teachers of combined grades to understand clearly. Her long-range plans indicated the themes and the time schedule for each theme, but unit plans were the most helpful to her. Alison used a multidisciplinary approach to the thematic units and said that she found this type of planning facilitated the integration of a number of subject areas, and this was important in a combined grade. It was an easier way to maintain the flow of curricula that were broken down into daily increments in the Alberta Program of Studies.

Alison had read the combined-grade manual during the summer. The first time she used it to help with her long-range plans and unit plans:

> The very first time I took the combined-grade manual home and I looked through it, I started working on my long-range and unit plans. This year I used it as a sort of guide. What I was looking for were connections between the two curricula. Bring out the social studies, line it up, and see where I could combine my units or how I was actually going to teach this over the course of the year. Social studies lends itself very well to combining. Science is harder. In language arts as long as I am working on my themes it would work well. If I monitored the checklists I would be able to teach all of the curricula together, no problem. (Interview #9)

Further probing of Alison's way of organizing the two curricula led to this conversation:

> I make myself a binder every year. This year I copied all the pages from the combined-grade manual. There are checklists of each grade level by subject. I used to do them myself, but now it is done for us. I put the Grade One and Two checklists side by side with the expectations for each grade level. I photocopied all of those, put the pages together, and have dividers for each subject. I also make myself sections with just the Grade One checklists and just Grade Two checklists so I can periodically go through those and actually use them as a working checklist. I just check off whatever we cover in class. I also used the *Planning for Success* checklists just to make sure that I know each of the outcomes and expectations for each grade level in my head. I have kids working at different levels, so I also look basically at all grades. This binder is sort of my Bible. Having the grade levels side by side when you are teaching a combined grade is a godsend; you know you don't have to cut and paste all the stuff trying to keep track of it. It helps me know what I need to do next. It helps with the continuity of learning. (Interview #5)

When I questioned Alison specifically on what it was like to teach different subject areas in a combined grade, she focused primarily on the science curriculum, which seemed to be a concern for her. Each grade had five topics in science to be covered in the year so, logically, with the two grades, Alison felt that she had to cover 10 of them:

> I find that covering the science for two grade levels is the most difficult area in the combined class. To try and get through ten units of science is impossible, but you know I always count about eight because I think I can teach two in other curriculum areas. I try very hard to finish the topics, but you need to know that some of the units are covered in a week, so only the basic concepts are learned. (Interview #9)

At this particular school, students would not automatically be placed in a combined grade the following year. She provided further insight, again using the science curriculum as an example:

> I have to plan to use different experiments from the other Grade Two teachers or have them do different activities. In Grade One it seems particularly important. The Grade Ones have the opportunity many times to hear, see, and participate in the Grade Two science experiments. I don't want the kids next year saying, "We did that last year." I really had to think about my planning and the curriculum to make sure that this did not happen. I ordered some suggestions from another

> district that had some different activities and experiments that would meet the expectations. I also worked with the other Grade Two teacher, and we planned what activities each of us would do. I really did not want to mess the children up for next year. (Interview #9)

I also noticed in one of my observations that Alison combined the Grade One and the Grade Two activities to teach one science concept. However, after the activity was completed, the Grade One students left the classroom and the Grade Two students continued with their learning. I asked Alison to clarify what had happened:

> I try to integrate as much as possible. The Grade Ones did some of the water centres, just exploring the water, but when it was time to do the actual experimenting I sent them to the Grade One room. I am able to arrange this sometimes with my colleague next door who teaches Grade One. It is not always possible. The kids do their writing about what they observed in their exploring in the straight Grade One classroom with the other kids who have done the same activity. While they are writing I can finish teaching the Grade Two curriculum outcomes about water with my Grade Twos. (Interview #2)

When asked if there were any other times that she integrated, she recalled:

> We sometimes do the same thing for both grade levels in math. For example, both grades need sorting or patterning. The Grade Ones, I just let them explore. All they have to do is sort by one attribute. With the Grade Twos I will just call them over to the table, and as a small group I teach the one more attribute they need. It is just a matter of extending the learning while the Grade Ones are not really listening to what we are saying. They are doing another similar centre activities. (Interview #1)

Two months later we continued the discussion about combining the two grade levels for math. She now had some concerns:

> I had told you I planned on doing the math together, but as the year is going on I am finding the math harder and harder to integrate. The Grade Twos are really zipping along, and the Ones are still doing little centres with adding and subtracting. I have changed my plans, and the Twos now have a duotang that they can do seatwork, or I do a mini lesson to get them started, and then I go to the Grade Ones, who still need the centre activities and manipulatives. I have to be with the Grade ones to direct their lesson. This change is taking some extra thinking and planning on my part. I have planned to have some parents come in

> and work with the Grade Ones at their centres. This frees up a little time for me to work with the Grade Twos a bit more. The parent involvement is sometimes not consistent, which makes it harder. (Interview #7)

One quality that Alison possessed was that she was very confident about her teaching. She enjoyed taking on a challenge and felt confident that she could handle anything (Research Journal, December 2nd). Because previous research (Miller, 1989) revealed that teachers felt that they needed some assistance when they were assigned to teach a combined grade, I asked Alison about this. She said:

> It would be very, very nice to have some assistance in some areas. Science in particular is really hard. I know that some schools do what is called *de-splitting*. Another teacher or the administrator teaches one grade level in science in the combined grade. I think everyone's dream would be to have an aide helping in his or her class, and, of course, with the two grade levels it would really help. I also know because I have taught classes like this, that in a straight grade with twenty-nine students and students with high needs an aide would be just as valuable. With the budgets the way they are, this is impossible, so we teachers just do the best we can. We have to be creative. I am lucky I get lots of support at this school. (Interview #11)

Alison was very aware of the new resources available to the combined-grade teacher. She had not attended the inservices on how to use the combined-grade manual because she felt confident that with her experience she could read the information and understand. Alison had many resources that she had developed on her own and then just used the ideas from the manual that she felt would improve her teaching and fit with her teaching style. Because I was in the classroom for four months, I observed the way that she taught both the science and social studies and was very interested in this approach, since I had not seen it before. She explained to me how she had organized her time for these subjects because of the suggestions in the combined-grade manual:

> I decided to teach the first unit in science in September in large blocks of time. When we finish the science unit I will teach the social studies unit also in large blocks of time. We usually took two or three afternoons a week for the units. I wanted to try this because it was recommended in the combined-grade manual. Everything I had read seemed really awesome and seemed to really make sense; I thought I would follow some of the ideas. I believed it made sense to block the science particularly. I thought with the younger students it would be more appropriate for their learning. If you are doing only science or only social studies every afternoon, or even sometimes for a full day or two, the kids really get into the subject. One advantage I could see was that you would not have to put the materials away and reset them up. The kids seemed to remember better from one day to the next what it was that they had done, and it was just easier to plan and have all the materials and field trips organized for that one unit. Maybe it will be easier to get through all the material, I don't know, but it is worth a try. It is an immersion kind of time. (Interview #1)

In answer to a question asking her philosophy on how children learn, Alison replied:

> I don't think there is any differences in the way kids learn in a combined grade. I thought about the activities I had done in the past and then planned how to include the two curricula. For example, the language arts centre every morning is something that I do in a straight grade. I always have a listening centre relating to the author of the month, and there is always a journal-writing centre appropriate to what we had discussed. In the activity centre we might be making up a book or some sort of other writing activity; there might be a video and usually a guided reading time with me one on one. In a classroom of kids many of them learn differently, but when you do centres, different kinds of activities, and use different teaching strategies, you can usually meet the learning needs of all of them. The combined classroom is not much different than the straight-grade classroom. Everyone should be teaching this way, although you may be more conscious of it in a combined grade. (Interview #2)

Alison talked many times about specific strategies that she used to teach. One activity that she felt really enhanced student learning was taking students on field trips. She was always very careful to choose trips that were directly related to the curriculum. She also considered both academic and social goals to be of importance. She felt that field trips enhanced the learning that had taken place in the classroom. Four students in this case were not fortunate enough to be able to participate in many activities outside of school, and the field trips were especially important to them. Because she had the two curricula to teach, I wondered whether this was more of a challenge in a combined grade. She said:

> First of all, I watch the number of field trips because of the cost to the parents, although the school will cover the cost of field trips for students that cannot afford to pay. There are some field trips mostly in language arts that I can take my whole class. We went to the theater production of *Cinderella* at the Citadel; it was appropriate for all the students. For other field trips specific to the curriculum I usually send or take the students in that grade with the straight-grade teacher. Someone comes and covers my class. The principal is also very open to hiring a substitute. It has not been a problem this year. (Interview #8)

Students

Teaching is really all about the students. The teacher is responsible for other people's children, both in and around the class. The teacher sets the tone for the day and for the year. The teacher identifies which students are weak in certain areas and which students are strong. Most important, the teacher needs to optimize the students' ability to learn. By its very nature, combined-grade teaching requires that the teacher be prepared for every moment of the student's day. Combined classrooms are more structured because the teacher needs to organize the students working on several different tasks. During our time together Alison spoke frequently about her students and how she preplanned for them. It was necessary to always plan and prepare for each aspect of her teaching. By doing so, she felt that she was giving her students her very best, and they deserved nothing less.

At this school all the teachers got together and initiated and planned a whole-school activity that would help all students become more organized. All students purchased a binder, and they alone were responsible for not losing it. They took the binders home every day. The binders had a take-home pocket with information for the parents and a homework section. In her combined grade Alison explained:

> It takes me a long time every day, twice a day actually, because in the morning we have to check the homework and in the afternoon put new homework in the binder. The students have to find the right section, open it, show it to me, and put it back into a different pocket. For this activity a combined grade is no different that a straight grade. The difficulty is in the age level of students you teach. For me it is really an exercise in frustration because of the grade level of the Grade One students. The Grade Ones, because it is new to them and they are so little, take a great deal longer time than the Grade Twos, who are experienced. Because the activity is worthwhile for the students, I persevere. (Interview #3)

With students at two distinct grade levels, I asked Alison how she organized the students for learning:

> I plan for students to be in their ability grouping for reading, and it has worked very well. For example, if we are studying an author and making our own books, the Grade Twos can be working with some of the Grade Ones at their level. Some of the Grade Ones that are advanced can be working at the Grade Two level in a different group. They seem to accept this more, and it is easier for them not to think they are behind because they seem to know that the Grade Two will do harder work; and when some of the Grade Ones are working with them and doing the same thing as the Grade Twos, somehow in their little heads this is okay. Those students that are not quite as good somehow still think they are fine because they are working at their level. This sounds confusing, and it is some days. In a combined grade the specific grade becomes less important; it is the level the student is presently working at that is important. (Interview #2)

When teaching younger students it was important for the teacher to help them organize their thinking and their work. It took a great deal of time each day. While I was observing Alison, I noticed that she had a definite plan for the way that she taught the activities for both grades. She elaborated:

> Because the kids are so young, I try to get the activities finished on one day. I do not want them to forget or to have to explain the whole thing over again. For example, this math project we started this morning we have had no time to finish, but I thought about it when we were working on it, and I will go back to it because they will be still thinking about the lesson and I had planned to finish. They will still remember the concepts, but if I wait until tomorrow, you know

> some of them will have lost a little. I really believe this works. By doing it later in the day I think the learning sticks more in their little heads. I read somewhere that you need to hear information more than once, at different times, to have it stored in your mind. (Interview #3)

When asked if she changed the way she did activities that were related to the lesson for combined grade, Alison said:

> In a combined grade I always plan to have open-ended activities so that it accommodates all of the kids. For example, one student is at a Grade Six reading level. He can read what he wants to read, and the activity still works for him. I make sure there are books at his level to read, and I help him in the library. My expectations also change for him as well as for the other students who are at different levels. I need to mention this particular student because he is a little bit out of the ordinary. (Interview #5)

Since the beginning of the year I had observed that Alison worked very hard on establishing and maintaining daily routines. From the moment that her students walked into the classroom to the moment they left in the afternoon, there were routines that they followed. Seatwork, lessons, lunch recess, and washroom breaks were all part of their daily routine. When there were changes or disruption in any of the routines, some students' behavior became challenging. As well, although the special events and whole-school activities were important, they did sometimes interfere with teaching the curriculum (Fieldnotes, December 1st). Alison felt that these interruptions needed to be planned for, and at times I could sense that she was frustrated when there appeared to be too many disruptions for the children. She explained:

> The whole-school events for the students sometimes interfere with the actual plans we have, things like Christmas concerts, Halloween, or special speakers. The kids love these events, and I feel they mostly address areas of the curriculum. But in reality your day plans are disrupted, and we have to devote a significant portion of the day reestablishing both the stability and structure of the routines. Once the routines are reestablished, the day becomes more productive and the behavioral problems subside. The stability that my students have come to expect in my classroom is back. (Interview #4)

It was interesting and important to recognize the strength of Alison's convictions and interest regarding keeping the classroom as organized and planned as possible. This research took place at the beginning of the year. She certainly stressed the importance of students receiving all the information about the events in the classroom. On this particular day Alison said:

> I want my students to be aware of what I have planned for the day ahead of time. I usually put an agenda on the board before the students arrive. Today in particular I really thought about what we were doing because I wanted them to see that it was going to be different, first of all, just so that they would know what was going on and we were going to reorganize the timetable and the desks; and secondly, there are several children in the room that are quite stuck on routine, and if I do anything different it upsets them. I wanted to head off any problems. (Interview #7)

One day when I arrived at the class I looked around and it appeared that there were many students missing. I asked the students where the other children were, and they said that they were sick. When I talked with Alison after class I asked about the number of students who were absent and whether it affected her teaching:

> It seems like with little kids we always get times where lots of kids get sick. Many of the students in the class may catch something. This is not unusual. Also, it may be that lots of kids are away, but there are always some that the parents send to school sick, so you have kids in class as well that are not in the best shape for learning. My teaching does change. I do not start any new big concepts when this happens. I also have to spend time saving the materials for the students that are away. Sometimes a friend or another member of the family will pick up the work. I have organized a spot in the room for homework. The kids just put the extra sheets or activities in there. It makes it much easier at the end of the day. (Interview #3)

One major advantage, mentioned in the previous research (Gomolchuk & Piland, 1995), in a combined grade is the modeling from the students that takes place, which is a real help with instruction As I observed in Alison's class, there were several examples of modeling. Alison explained what she did:

> I kind of plan for the kids to help each other and have them sit beside each other. It is not always an older student that helps. For example, the two Grade One girls help each other. They sit right beside each other. The one that is weaker is much better with just a little one-on-one direction from her peer than me talking to the whole class, where she quite loses it. This student is really improving. I try and group or pair up students that can model after each other in close proximity. The students who are at a higher level are also learning. (Interview #4)

Interactive Planning

Alison was an extremely well organized and planned teacher (Researcher Journal, November 13th). However, all teachers change their plans in response to the way the students are responding or to the environment on a particular day. This was an inescapable dimension of classroom teaching. The unpredictability of classroom life plays a role in teacher instructions and plans. Rather than viewing these changes in her plans as barriers, Alison felt that it was better to change her approach and thinking because often the revised plans better suited the needs of her students, and certainly provided them with comfort and control over what took place. Different facets of the classroom environment influenced planning and instructional practices. Alison felt that interactive planning helped her grow as a teacher. Although always well planned, she was flexible as well: "I do deviate from my plans. Yes, emphatically yes, maybe because I get a little bored or something just strikes me about a particular activity. I love those things we call *teachable moments*" (Interview #11).

Alison always had a written plan and a mental script for the outline of the lesson. Many of the details were filled in during the teaching of the lesson, and adjustments were made depending on the classroom circumstances at the time. Having experienced the unexpected in teaching in the classroom helped Alison think about the different facets of instruction that influenced planning and instructional practices. She stated:

> I feel like I sometimes like to be a spur-of-the-moment kind of teacher; you know, grab the moment: Oh, it is snowing. Let's run outside and look at it and do a bunch of stuff about snow. I feel that I can't be quite as much that way in a combined grade with having to be a bit more organized and prepared for meeting both of the grade curricula expectations. (Interview #1)

The extent to which Alison carried out her preplanning is noteworthy insofar as she saw flexibility and open-endedness as desirable given the nature and varied interests of her students. When asked what makes a good combined teacher, Alison replied that one of the most important qualities was flexibility in your long-range plans, daily plans, and unit plans. She defined flexibility as being willing to change and accommodate for the students in front of you. One example of this characteristic happened one Friday afternoon as I was observing Alison. I had a copy of her plans for the afternoon, but all of a sudden she stopped the children working and quickly had her students sit in a circle to talk about their first month in school together. The discussion was uplifting, honest, and surprisingly revealing. Some thoughts that the students shared were as follows:

> We learned that all of us would learn to read really well. We know how to read a lot of words already, like on cereal boxes, on stop signs too. We learned to write. We all do it differently. Some of us print letters and some of us print words. Some of us copy words, and some of us sound out words. We learned that we help each other learn at school. I helped my friend sound out some words, and she showed me where the word *apple* is on the wall. (Interview #2)

During our conversation after the children had left for the day, I asked her why she had changed her plans. She explained that she could see that some of the students were tired and not working as well as they could, and she thought that they needed some activity. As well, she believed that reflection was another way to build their self-esteem and enhance their learning. The students' thoughts and observations about their learning that I heard illustrated to me how easily and naturally young children assess themselves and one another. It was the behavior of their teacher that influenced their learning and motivated the children, not dominated them. "During even the briefest interaction with a student I try to recognize each child's growth so they will learn to recognize their own growth," said Alison.

Although a certain amount of variability existed in terms of how far the preplanning was carried, there was no doubt that Alison was aware of the pitfalls inherent in overplanning. She recalled:

> Some things are not planned for. With very young students in Grade One and Grade Two, this happens many times. After recess I am all ready to teach. I hurry the kids in to class, as I don't want to waste time. Invariably a student has had a problem outside at recess. There go my immediate plans. Right away in my head, even though I am starting to deal with the problem and discuss with the whole class the recess issue, I am thinking about how I will change what I was planning to do, either make it different or skip some of the activities planned. This does not bother me as I am used to it, and I feel that the students are still learning. Usually the impromptu lesson is aligned with something in the health curriculum anyway. (Stimulated-recall interview #7)

The ability and, perhaps more significant, the willingness to be so sensitive to the emergent issues, desires, and interests of her students were apparent. Student input was obviously welcome and acted upon to a large degree.

Alison recognized that interactive planning was important in her teaching. This was clearly demonstrated when at times the role of the teacher as leader and student as passive follower underwent a major change. Quite clearly there were times when I noted that Alison assumed a less dominant role in favor of a role that was supportive and facilitative; at the same time students were encouraged to take a more active role in the formative decisions surrounding their learning. In addition, she encouraged her students to extend their thinking skills rather than just absorb knowledge:

> When I notice they are really interested in something else rather than the concept we are working on, we make a detour. I really enjoy this. It is a thrill to see their little minds working so hard. When this happens in class, I must say that usually we get a lot more done. The students' interest and attitude is reflected in the quality of work that they do. Because of the combined group we often get the most interesting learning happening. You have a ready-made diverse discussion groups. It is great. (Interview #4)

Alison felt that positive student conduct such as excitement in learning and the desire to invest time and energy into their learning was a concrete reflection of effective teacher planning. Such positive conduct was readily apparent in her class. She encouraged students to "buy into" their learning. She tied interest and positive behavior together, which is perhaps why interactive planning was evident in her management, as she said:

> Management is something that I don't plan for. It just happens. All the strategies are in my head and seem to pop out when I need them. For example, when you are teaching you are constantly looking around to check to make sure they are attending. You are teaching your lesson or working with the students in groups and you see a student playing with something. I just walk up and take the article he/she is playing with. There is no fuss, nothing. I may take a quick moment to whisper to the student about attending, but there is usually no pause in the other students' activities or listening. (Interview #7)

Alison felt that her planning promoted the development of a sense of timing, a necessary consideration in the face of extensive curricula to be covered in two grade levels. As she was watching herself on the video she noted:

> I impress myself. I can sort of see myself thinking. Walking around, I was really in my mind just thinking, and how much longer would I let them work? How much longer are they going to be still quiet? Or is it going to be just another minute and I would lose them? It was perfect timing on my part. (Stimulated-recall interview #7)

Alison spent a great deal of time thinking about her students and about appropriate learning strategies for them. She knew that although Alberta Learning dictated the general direction to be followed in the Program of Studies, the means to the end were in the hands of the teacher, within reason, of course. She felt that in a combined grade it was necessary to be able to interpret the curriculum to suit the extreme heterogeneity presented by children's needs and abilities in a typical combined classroom. Alison was enthusiastic and interested in what her students had to learn (Reflective journal, December 10th). She was prepared, familiar with, and comfortable with what was to be taught in both grades. She had the ability to gauge and a willingness to explore what was current or topical in the lives of her students. In that sense her daily planning involved a great deal of interactive planning:

> My plans are totally motivated by the kids and how I perceive them to be on that day. That, of course, does not mean that we do not teach the curriculum, we just do what we want. Of course not. It is just that I am aware of the students' needs and interests. It is not the students' job to know what they have to learn; it is mine. I figure you make it interesting and the kids are going to find it interesting, and you do that with everything. That is probably why I know that I do that interactive planning. When I am trying to have the children understand something difficult, I am always trying in my head to give them ideas that relate to their lives. (Interview #7)

Post Planning

Alison reflected daily on the work the students had done. She did a lot of marking. Because classroom life is so busy, during the day she did not have time to reflect on her work. Looking at the student work indicated whether the teaching had been effective. She said:

> I do spend a lot of time going through things that they have done during the day. Then I know where I am going to go tomorrow. I think about individual kids and what I should be seeing in their work. If I don't see it, at home or after school I plan how I am going to work individually with that student or give him/her extra work in the area of trouble. (Interview #9)

I noticed one day that there were a number of new games in the room. When I asked Alison about this, she said:

> Well, this week was rainy, and I was thinking about the last time we had an indoor recess. I remember it bothered me because the kids seemed disruptive. I brought a couple of games from home, and I remembered there were some games here that I had not gotten out. I knew that they would need something else to focus on. I do not like them writing on the chalkboard. You always have to erase it and it gets all messy. (Interview #11)

It appeared that Alison thought about how her plans had gone previously on a rainy day recess and decided to change her strategies. When asked specifically when she thought about her work, she said:

> I think about my day daily and, on the way to work, review what I am going to do, and remember how it went. But for the overall, I always go into work during any holidays. This gives me some time to really reflect on what we have done. I check my curriculum outcomes and sort of see where I am. I go through all the kids' stuff, and then I know what I need to do. (Interview #4)

Factors that Influenced Planning in a Combined Grade Classroom

What are the teacher's beliefs about teaching in a combined grade? How do teachers of a combined grade meet the needs of their students, each with his or her own learning style and ability level, challenge both the students who want more work to do and those who have difficulty grasping the basic ideas, and ensure that students understand and communicate their learning? What strategies do teachers and administrators implement to develop a positive relationship with students and parents in a combined grade? These were just some of the questions about teacher beliefs and practices in a combined grade that I found myself asking Alison. I clearly recall that during our first interviews Alison said that many teachers, administrators, and parents, both new and experienced, asked these same questions.

Teacher Beliefs about Teaching a Combined Grade

In an initial meeting at the end of August before the students were back at school, Alison and I began to get to know each other by talking generally about combined grades. Our conversation started with her talking about how some teachers have certain entrenched beliefs about grades. She said:

> Teachers worry about having to combine two curricula. They feel children of different grades are too diverse to be effectively educated in the same classroom. This concern is based on the old-fashioned assumption that students in graded classrooms all have the same ability. However, anyone that is a teacher will tell you that age and development are not always on the same parallel timetable. In fact, children put together because they are close in chronological age still have academic, social, and emotional needs that span several years. All of the children in a combined grade will not have the same degree of readiness for any given lesson, but children in a graded classroom also have differences. I think that in any single grade there might be a four-year span in pupil's readiness. Furthermore, children progress in all subjects at different rates, and I am always surprised by how little the age corresponds to the ability and how difficult it becomes to guess who is in what grade after a while. (Interview #1)

It should not come as a surprise that Alison felt, as a combined-grade teacher, that she did have to teach somewhat differently than a single-grade teacher did, even though she knew that single-grade classes also had children at different grade levels in their class. Teaching differently meant that she had to implement strategies that would integrate curriculum for the students as well as making sure that with each subject area she had the students working on the curriculum outcome that they needed to learn. She felt that the strategies she used in her combined grade should be used in a single grade as well:

> For one thing, due to the wide range of students and the emphasis on continuous progress, you must have a wide range of books and materials rather than grade-specific textbooks and basal readers. You must be comfortable implementing practices such as cooperative learning, literature-based reading programs, thematic reaching, and learning centres. These are the sorts of strategies you need.

> Straight grades certainly use these as well, but they are absolutely necessary in a combined grade. I am lucky because I have lots of energy most days and like to work hard. In a combined grade, you need to be able to do this. (Interview #2)

Alison believed that

> A first-year teacher should not be assigned by the principal to teach a combined class. The teacher should have a thorough understanding of at least one grade-level curriculum and have taught a straight grade for at least one year. A first-year teacher needs to concentrate on learning the one curriculum she is responsible for and pacing their lessons to ensure that they finish that curriculum by the end of the year. Finding the right pace is a challenge. They need to discover their own teaching style and abilities. (Interview #9)

She actually felt that having more experience with different kinds of students was a real advantage. Alison provided an example of how her experience with special-needs students, particularly with specific problems such as autism, was advantageous in her combined grade. During the first week of school she recalled that she had noticed that one of her students demonstrated some autistic-like behaviors:

> I think you have a little bit more patience and empathy for the students and their different individual needs. If you are familiar with the strategies that help students with disabilities in a regular or a combined grade, it makes it easier to deal with the student. Your expectations are more realistic because you are more knowledgeable about their learning abilities. I knew right away how to handle this little girl, and she settled into the class nicely and is working well. (Interview #3)

She also linked the attitude of the teacher as critical to the success of a combined grade. She provided the following example:

> I think anybody can sense right away—kids, parents and administration—whether or not you think that a combined class works. What your background feelings, attitudes, and experiences are is important. As a kid I had a positive combined-class experience. I kind of saw it as a challenge and a compliment to be asked to teach a combined grade. I thought to myself, I have taught both grades separately, and now I am going to make them work together. I understand that others may not see it that way. They see it as, "Oh no, I have to learn how to make everything fit. This is going to be much harder." (Interview #9)

Whether some educators and parents believed that combined grades were good or bad, Alison believed that this classroom organization was a reality for many elementary schools, especially small schools with changing populations. She believed that in some cases they were better than the single-grade classroom. Her beliefs were consistent with the literature. She explained:

> There are many advantages kids realize in a combined grade that they don't experience in a regular classroom. I believe most of the students are almost always better achievers. I think the younger-grade students do better and the older-grade students, not to be outdone by the younger ones, work harder. The younger students benefit just from being with the older students, role modeling and learning things they probably wouldn't even be exposed to in the younger grade. If you give the older ones more responsibility and leadership, they do rise to the occasion. They have other children to guide them. It you reverse the rules and put the younger ones in this role, they will also do well. Again, what is vital is the teacher's attitude. (Interview #1)

When asked about the disadvantages she said:

> I find it just takes a lot more organization for the teachers. For example, you only have so much time, and you are mandated to cover the curriculum for both grade levels and for the students who are above or below grade level. This means you have to constantly be reading the program of studies and figuring out how to integrate or teach individually. I know I am lucky to have some of the resources I have, but it is still more organization. I am not sure about the students; I am not sure I see there are any disadvantages to either of the grade levels. Each of the grade levels are getting their curriculum, and the expectations for all the students in the class are being met and maybe even more so. That is a positive thing for me and, I would think, for the parents as well. (Interview #1)

Alison had talked earlier about the teaching strategies that she felt were important to use in a combined grade. I probed a little more and asked if there were any specific practices that were different in a combined grade. She elaborated on this:

> I think I have to spend a little more time initially on rules and expectations, and I do spend a lot more time in September on building a class climate and building that community within our group because we are two separate groups. They see themselves as two separate grades, but I think you do a lot more teaching about getting along and being friends, and I probably spend a good portion of

> September just on those kinds of activities, really building cooperation and helping each other. And although my classes are separate grades, we do projects together and we partner in different ways, and I believe this is important in a combined environment. Once students have the skills to cooperate and communicate together, you reap the benefits in the classroom. I also think I would do most of these kind of activities in a straight grade. (Interview #9)

Locating Appropriate Materials and Resources

Alison suggested that one area that seemed unfair for combined-grade teachers until two years ago was the amount of materials and resources available for the combined-grade teachers. The problem was further compounded when the curriculum in all subjects except social studies were changed. Alison shuddered when she talked about the science curriculum. There were five units mandated to be taught at each grade level, and they were difficult to integrate. Alison felt it was impossible to teach 10 units in one year and that this might be one of the reasons that teachers did not want to teach a combined grade. During the last two years the school district resource centre had written manuals for combined grades. Each one had unique ideas that helped with planning. In science in particular the manual gave some examples of how teachers could integrate some of the units. Alison discussed how she made use of the manuals:

> I wouldn't say I use it, but I actually read the whole book at the end of the summer to help me prepare for my class. It is just awesome. I have used lots of stuff, parent letters and other activities right out of the manual. It is a very good resource for the combined grade.

The Need for Differentiated Instruction

Twenty-three students. Twenty-three individuals. Twenty-three personalities. Each student was unique, different, and special. No two students were the same. Together they were Alison's combined grade (Researcher journal, October 18th). She made a special effort to learn about the uniqueness and individuality of each of her students. She wanted to challenge the students at their grade level of achievement in a manner that would allow them to reach their full potential. She thought:

> Anyone who is an experienced teacher would have a good understanding of grade level of achievement and when faced with teaching a combined grade thinks about how they are going to teach the two curricula together. Then, of course, you see the whites of your students' eyes and you realize that it is probably easier than in a straight grade. The combined grade frees me up to do some activities that you could not do in a straight grade. I don't need to worry. I use ability groupings and make sure I cover the curricula. (Interview #2)

Alison viewed the second-grade curriculum as an extension of what happens in first grade: "Students read and write in first grade, and they do in second grade as well, only it is more sophisticated" (Interview #3).

Although Alison was responsible for covering the first- and second-grade curricula, she could decide when to address certain topics. She made the decision about when she thought that the students were ready. For example, she said:

> Understanding money and making change is one of the outcomes in the curriculum for both the first grade and the second grade. The second-grade outcomes are just a slight extension of what they learned in grade one. I decided this year that I would introduce money to the students in June so that I could ask parents and children to do a little homework and practice using money and making change over the summer. This should be easy for the parents. It works well for both grades. In fact, the Grade Ones are often a little bit ahead because this is one area where I teach all the concepts to both grades. The Grade Ones are almost Grade Twos, so it works. (Interview # 4)

When questioned about the nature of her class, Alison considered the students typical of a combined Grade 1 and Grade 2 class academically, emotionally, and socially. She noted, however, how the students had been chosen for her class:

> The teachers get together in June and do the organization. They are very conscientious about where the kids are going and whom they can work well with in the class. If there were problems with two students, the teachers really try to

> separate them. Parent requests to some extent are considered, but it is primarily the teachers who do a really good professional job of placing students where they will learn best. (Interview #1)

A couple of weeks later I probed a little further into the placement of students and asked whether she felt there was a difference in how you place students in a combined grade compared to how you place students in a straight grade. She responded:

> I do think they need to be placed carefully, because in order to make it successful the kids have to be able to handle working independently to a certain degree. I mean, if a child were so low in ability that they are one or two grades below their grade level, it would be a much more negative learning year for them in a combined grade. I believe that the student should not be placed in this type of classroom organization. (Interview #4)

'Jack of all trades, master of none.' Who has not heard that statement? Alison observed that this saying adequately described how she sometimes felt as she tried to accomplish a multitude of tasks. She taught a group of students who possessed a broad spectrum of abilities and challenges, and she wanted each of her students to be challenged according to his or her individual abilities. I assured her that, during the weeks I had been observing, I had seen a great deal of change in the students. She responded:

> Sometimes it is just frustrating. You think you are accomplishing nothing. I guess because you are so close to the students, some days you don't see the change in them. I try to provide both the support and stimulation that my students need in order to expand their knowledge and thinking skills. Sometimes, I am left wondering if I am doing enough. I know that this happens with every teacher whether you are in a straight grade or a combined grade. (Interview #4)

She continued to talk about her practices in a combined grade. Again Alison mentioned that she thought they were not much different than in a regular grade. She gave an example:

> Today I had to have the Grade Ones get started on a seatwork activity, and they had to do it independently while I was busy with the hands-on activity with the Grade Twos. The Grade Ones' activity was not really anything different. Students are expected to do independent work. I always do individual seatwork and have lots of centres and hands-on activities. (Interview #2)

Three times a year it was common practice for the schools in the district to report on student achievement. In a combined grade Alison felt that this was particularly important. As a teacher you must find effective ways to monitor the learning of each child. Knowing the impact that the teacher's comments might have on her students, Alison took a long time to complete the progress reports. The comments section needed a few carefully chosen words that would not detract from the grades but help to explain them. Alison said that each student actually creates his or her own commentary; it exists in their grades, on tests, in assignments, their homework, their behavior, and their attitudes. Alison knew that her comments were important. They helped explain, enhance, and clarify a student's progress and performance. She explained the importance of the first reporting period in a combined grade:

> What you say on report card in terms of specific to the grade is extremely important. I had to go home and I had to generate double sets of comments. I had to figure out what I wanted to say specifically about Grade One and things I wanted to say about Grade Two. I did not have a mutual comment bank for my class. This is a bit more work. I believe it is absolutely critical to do this. If I saw a report card that was similar at both levels, as a parent I would be worried. (Interview #9)

In a discussion of report cards with Alison, the conversation naturally led to how she assessed students. She said:

> Well, I obviously use different things in different areas. I watch to see how they solve problems or how they do their experiments. Some of the process of how they get to the product, although I do assess product as well. In language arts I do one-on-one reading. When I am walking around and they are in their cooperative groups, I do write down things, and try to write down information. My anecdotal

> notes are more problems or really extraordinary things that children have said or done. I also write some things that people say within their group so that we can have a session after on what makes a good group, what does not, what happened in your group that worked really well, and what didn't. (Interview #9)

Practical knowledge, interactive thinking, decision making, past experiences, and more, combined with an understanding of students and the classroom context, enabled a teacher to read a situation and then act upon it. Alison and I saw an example of this during our stimulated recall session. She recollected:

> Now some of the students are all done the activity. But this is okay. I let them wander around a bit. They have done lots of sitting and listening. They are just chatting with each other, and they are just sort of straightening their desks and looking at books. I watch really carefully; it does not look like I was, but I am actually, and that sort of impresses me. I was really in my mind thinking, how much longer should I let them go? How much longer are they going to be still quiet? Or is it going to be just another minute and I am going to lose them? I am very conscious of watching my students. It looks like I decided to get them started on their homework page. I noticed that some were starting to become unfocused. Some of the kids could go longer and still be fine, but I have to make my decision about when to stop the activity based on those kids who can't. (Stimulated-recall interview #7)

Building a Relationship With Students

Observations in Alison's classroom certainly support the picture of Alison as a loving teacher who tried to make every one of her students feel special. She certainly impressed me with her friendly, supportive, trusting, and accepting manner. I observed that children were able to approach their teacher easily with the assurance that they would be given a sympathetic hearing. Alison commented on the organization of students in her classroom this year. She was enjoying the combination of students she had received.

> I like that the younger students are the fewer number and that the older students are more. I like this arrangement because I am more familiar with their expectations. There are fourteen Grade Twos and eight Grade Ones. I can teach them from the Grade Two perspective, focus a little bit more sort of on their

> curricular expectations, and then bring the Grade Ones into that. I am also enjoying the small class. I feel that I can individualize way more. This is very important in a combined grade. (Interview #1)

The absence of behavior modification strategies and criticism of children's behavior was quite remarkable in this classroom. There was a notable lack of aggressive and boisterous behavior amongst Alison's students. I attributed this to her interactions with students that were usually done in a whisper and that her concern for them (as evidenced by such acts as hugging students when they were upset) was real. She described her methods of classroom management:

> Over the years my methods of disciplining have changed. It may be that the kids have changed as well. Who knows? I now try to cut down to a fine line the wait time in my classroom. Kids are never sitting around doing nothing, and neither am I. I always try to have a positive approach to disciplining the kids. If you like and respect the kids and build a good rapport with them and provide a good program, the discipline is minimal. (Interview # 2)

Alison maintained that today's curriculum demands more of children that it did years ago. She supported this change because it agreed with her experience of working with six- and seven-year-olds:

> Another thing that I have realized over the past few years at this school is that these young students are capable of far more that we often give them credit for. As a teacher I want to push the kids as far as I can possibly push them. I used to expect far less of them. (Interview #4)

Alison was very aware of the type of development she wanted for her students. She believed in a balance between academic skills and what she called 'getting-along skills.' She felt that making friends was perhaps closely related to being able to communicate. Her instructional methods and classroom rules were synergistic to this goal. Alison encouraged wider friendships and would sometimes move children away from preferred classmates to other locations. Many of the practices used by Alison and the student activities she did helped the children expand and deepen their friendships. She rarely thought about grade levels when she planned her seating arrangements. Many of her assignments required interactive and cooperative student behaviors. The desks in her classroom were placed in groups of two or four, and the groups were changed regularly. She had three large tables where students worked together on projects. One activity that also enhanced friendships was when all of the children were brought together to sit in the reading corner. This time was important for a couple of reasons. She said:

> To me the individual needs of the students are very important. There are students who have psychological and emotional needs that, to me, if you can't help in that area, then academically they are not going to achieve very well anyway. It is important that students get to know everyone in class. Because they are a combined grade, this is especially important. We are Room Nine. We are not Grade One and Grade Two. In the reading corner I find they sit with different students naturally. (Interview #9)

According to Alison, the reading corner also provided time for the students to demonstrate leadership. Before reading the story, the students discussed the calendar and the weather. Students took turns leading the discussion:

> I do this because they love it. I know they play school at home all the time; so pretending to be the teacher is easy for them. I get them to do the whole calendar and all the temperature. They are naturals, and they just think it is so funny. I model a little bit of it at the beginning of the year; for example, "Boys and girls, what is the date today? Hands up." I encourage them to use that kind of language. They are so good. They do it well, and it fits right into the oral part of the curriculum in language arts. (Stimulated-recall interview # 7)

Alison acknowledged that she had thought a great deal about what she believed was the number one priority in her classroom. She also acknowledged how she saw herself:

> I need to provide a safe and caring environment for the children, and they will learn. All students need to feel safe with their teachers, and I try to see and feel the world as my students see it, to encourage the students, and to ultimately build

> the students into stronger learners. If I make them feel comfortable and feel like they are part of a community and that I am there to help them and guide them, learning is going to happen. I like the idea of being more of a facilitator as opposed to an instructor; the instructor would just stand there and lecture or do the class telling. In some cases you have to do that, I guess, but if you are a facilitator you get them interested in learning. I believe this strategy just goes so much further, and the students will learn and retain the information. (Interview #9)

Alison described the various ways that she adapted her teaching in a combined grade to provide children with success. As I watched her lessons I observed that when her children answered questions incorrectly, they were accepted and encouraged to keep trying:

> I want my students to take risks and not be afraid to be wrong. I always tell them that it is a great way to learn. I think as a teacher you have to create that kind of climate in your classroom. In a combined class this is really important because when we are discussing something, it may be a Grade One or Two concept, but I want all the children thinking about the answer. I also want the children to accept each other's mistakes without laughing. (Interview #3)

In Alison's opinion it was important to listen to her students. Listening to their words was the easy part; listening to what they are not saying took a great deal of practice. Students have a world of their own that they brought with them to school. Some environments were warm and bright, and for others their environments may have certain challenges. By watching Alison listen to one of her students share, I realized she was always in an unconscious way gathering information about her students, and that in turn helped her teach to their individual needs:

> I do stop and listen to the students, and if there is a problem with somebody, I think it is very important to take a few moments from class time and help the students solve the conflict. These situations usually happen at recess. With this particular student—he is so little, and his parents don't provide much help to him—I needed to address a problem about what happened to his volcano at recess. A bigger student in the class was involved. The problem was that the younger student had spent his whole recess building what he called a volcano, and then the older student came along and smashed it to the ground. It took me a few

> minutes to get their stories straight and understand what had happened. In the end I suggested that the bigger student could go out next recess with the little student and help the younger student build another volcano. They were both happy with this solution and sort of felt, I hope, that they themselves had helped solve the issue. (Interview #7)

Alison's philosophy of education had the premise that children should like their work and enjoy school:

> I always want them to feel successful and motivated. I never want the student to go home and think, I can't do anything; I'm a failure. It is difficult sometimes to do that. But just overall I really want them to feel like they enjoy school and want to come every day. Each day I try, even if it is at the end of the day, to make sure I have told each one of them something they have accomplished or done well. (Interview #3)

I was in the classroom one of the first days that there was a big snowfall. In my discussion with Alison before class started, we talked about how unplanned events such as this might affect the morning. A snow day could be a day of bliss for both children and teachers. In our lives we all have routines. From the moment we get up in the morning to the moment we return to sleep, we all follow routines. They are important to us because they provide us with some degree of structure. Adults as well as children need that structure because it is emotionally comforting. When our routines are disrupted, we lose that feeling of comfort. That same thing happens in our classrooms. The change in weather brought some changes to the routines in Alison's classroom. Following my observations of the morning, although we had discussed the fact that there might be some changes in her plans, Alison was still concerned that I had noticed that the students were not as settled as usual. She explained:

> I have worked hard on establishing and maintaining daily routines. From the moment the students walk into the classroom to the moment they leave in the afternoon, there are routines they follow. Seatwork, lessons, lunch, recess, and bathroom breaks are all part of our daily routine. When there is a change or

> disruption in any of our routines, some students' behavior becomes challenging. Their comfort level is disrupted. Although I know that there will always be those unexpected events that I have not planned for, it means that I have to spend a significant amount of my day reestablishing both the stability and the structure of the routines. If it is an activity or a change of subjects that I have planned, I make a big issue with the kids at the beginning of the day and tell them what we are going to do today. Once that is done the day becomes productive again. In school, as a teacher I know there are going to be lots of things that disrupt the students' routines. (Interview #9)

In my observations I noted that Alison was constantly very busy in the classroom, largely because of her teaching style. She would set one group of students to work independently and teach a new concept to the other group of students, or she would set the class to work as a whole group or in many small groups (two or three students in a group) and then individually check the students' work. She had numerous interactions with her students. Some interactions were one-on-one with a student, some interactions were with the students working in groups, and some interactions were with the whole class.

Alison had high expectations for her students. She believed that students tended to internalize the beliefs that their teacher had about their ability. Generally, they "rise or fall to the level of expectation of their teacher." In everything that Alison did she projected an attitude and belief that her students shared her enthusiasm for learning. For example, during each observation I saw her smiling, leaning toward the children, and making eye contact with students frequently. Her students appeared to try hard for Alison. The environment was conducive to learning. It was designed for movement, hands-on learning, cooperative social interaction, cooperative learning experiences, choice, individual learning, and enjoyment. The environment was carefully planned by Alison to facilitate the students' learning experiences.

Alison had a good memory for some of the funny things that had happened in her class. She kept notes from parents and had a place where she kept funny little written statements from children. For example, she said that one morning in her class the students came in upset. The patrols had made them wait too long to cross at the crosswalk, and one of her students had run across the street. He had been sent to the office, and he was crying when he came to the class. He said, "the trolls were not nice to them and that was why he ran across the street." Another time I was observing in Alison's gym class, and she instructed the children to "line up in a circle." When I mentioned it later, she laughed. Alison used humor in her classroom many times. She explained:

> Laughing and having fun helps me and the students get through the day sometimes. I think it is good for the kids. You never know what kind of homes they have or what they might be experiencing. One thing I found really funny yesterday morning, although I did not share it with the kids, was when Luke came to me in tears and said, " My mommy didn't give me a kiss goodbye." He was looking up at me with tears in those great big, brown eyes. We stopped everything in the class and I gave him a big kiss and asked him if that would do him for the day. It was all over in a few minutes, and all the students were back at work. He was so cute and funny. Luke is such a little guy you just have to love him. (Interview #9)

Building a Relationship With Parents

Communication is the foundation for the type of relationships that teachers form. Alison was a very open-minded person. She saw herself as a family person and as someone who had confidence in her own abilities. She felt that it was important to help the parents become more confident and comfortable with her. For example, at the open house she first explained some of the school and classroom practices and then shared some of her own personal life. "I told them that I had a daughter going into Grade One this year as well, so 'I know how you are feeling.' I think from the parents' perspective they just need to feel comfortable about talking to me. I don't want them to worry that their kids' needs are not being met" (Interview #1).

She made sure that she contacted parents on a regular basis in writing, by telephone, or in person. This created a line of communication that was open for the passing of both information and feedback. Sometimes the feedback was positive, and at other times it was not. I asked her to explain a little more about her first contact with parents at the open house. Alison distinguished her own format for the evening from other teachers when she said:

> For me, establishing and maintaining open lines of communication with my students' parents has been a priority from the beginning of the school year. This is especially important in a combined grade. Sometimes parents are worried. I make sure that I am totally prepared with my plan book and the curriculum guidebooks. Some parents still call it a *split* class. I think there are a lot of negative messages in that term. I think a lot of parents are still wondering how a teacher can teach two grades and how can a teacher separate all the subject areas. Every year you have a new batch of parents, and they want those reassurances.
>
> This year there were not too many questions. I guess that was a positive statement for me. The Grade Two parents wanted to make sure that the Grade Twos would be challenged appropriately and I wouldn't sort of 'dumb down' the curriculum. They also wanted to make sure that they were not spending too much time helping the Grade Ones.
>
> The Grade One parents, they were coming from a more sort of personal level; they wanted the children to be happy and their needs to be met. They seemed a little more concerned. One mom wanted to make sure that the Grade Two students did not do the work for her child. It's interesting the Grade One parents were more from a personal perspective, but the Grade Two parents were more into curriculum and where they would be challenged. (Interview #1)

It was evident that Alison believed that parents were partners in their children's learning. Alison recalled that on the first day:

> I sent out a letter to each of the students' parents. The letter stated, "Although we have just one fleeting school year together, I want to make a contribution that lasts a lifetime. I am inviting you to become an important partner in your child's education." She asked five questions of the parents: "What are your child's interests? How and what does your child play? What kind of learner do you think

> your child is? What are your goals and hopes for your child this year? What other things are important for me to know?" (Interview #1, Document #1)

The answers returned provided substantial information about how the parents felt about the school and clarified what parents' expectations were for their children. As well, it introduced Alison to the parents in a positive way.

In her role as a teacher, Alison gave expression to her beliefs by always being prepared to accept and discuss concerns or questions with both children and parents. She was, furthermore, very concerned about the social development of her pupils and showed a great deal of knowledge about their home backgrounds as well as the classroom interactions of her pupils. When asked, for example, whose child she would least be prepared to talk about should a parent drop in unannounced, she replied, "Nobody's" (Interview #2). Even when I pressed a little harder, Alison felt unable to single out one child whom she could not discuss with confidence and equanimity. Similarly, evidence of her natural tendency to accept all students was provided when I asked if there were any students who did not fit into a combined grade. She was unable to offer a name.

As we continued to talk about her relationship with parents, Alison reminded me of the Friday afternoon reflecting time she had started when the children appeared to be tiring of seatwork. This was in the first month of school, and we had been discussing the concept of flexibility. She said:

> Every week we have been doing the same reflecting activity. The following week at the end of our discussion I decided to copy their statements down on chart paper and put them up on the wall. The next week I again expanded the activity by copying their statements on a sheet for them to take home. Some parents have told me they really enjoyed reading their reflections, and it provided opportunities for parents to talk to their children specifically about their schoolwork. I think it is important that the students understand what they have learned. Usually children come home and parents ask them about their day, and all the say is either, "We did not do anything" or "Fine." (Interview #2)

Alison felt that in a combined grade it was especially important that the parents be knowledgeable and comfortable with what their children were learning. In the beginning when all the students brainstormed their ideas about what they were learning, Alison wrote them on the blackboard and separated the information into columns, one column for each grade level. Each student in Grade 1 wrote the same paragraph and each student in Grade 2 wrote the same paragraph. After two months the students were able, after some discussion, to write their own messages. Alison pointed out that this practice of weekly communication from the students to the parents on Fridays helped parents know what their child had accomplished during their week at school. These Friday reflection books were important to the students as well. She explained that it was important for the students to understand that there were differences in what they were learning depending on their grade level. This exercise taught all the children how to begin to reflect, assess, and communicate their growth. Alison believed that when learning and assessing became intertwined, student progress was enhanced. This was another strategy that communicated student growth to parents, and it also became another way to involve the students in the assessment, evaluation, and communication process. As well, it became a powerful tool to model in writing strategies and behaviors for the students. Alison continued to monitor and adjust this classroom routine to ensure successful learning experiences for each of her students.

Teacher Cooperation, Coordination, and Collegiality

When I first met Alison and we were talking informally about her work and the school climate, she said that she found that most people in her school liked to talk to each other about students and their learning. The staff room and the hallways were sometimes noisy places with staff talking together. As well, they were comfortable with observing one another engaged in daily activities and sharing knowledge of their teaching with one another. She felt very strongly that everyone on her staff actively helped one another become more skillful.

Alison was an experienced teacher and knew that a combined grade was always more of a challenge. The first major obstacle when it was confirmed that she would be teaching a combined grade in the fall was working with the other teachers in June to organize the classes. Historically, the school had between 275 and 325 students. The number of students registered in June determined the number of classes and their structure.

The school and community were familiar with combined grades and the way they were organized. When I asked the other teachers during a recess break about the meetings they had in June, the teachers said that the key to creating a successful combined classroom was balancing the student population and providing enough diversity so that children could learn and support each other, but not so much diversity that the classroom became unmanageable. Generally, they also looked for students who could work more independently. Alison said:

> I have been very impressed since I have been at this school at the way that the teachers get together in June and organize the classes. They are very conscientious about where the kids are going and whoever they could work well with within the class. Some parent requests are looked at and certainly considered. If parents are interested in a combined grade and support the concept, the children are likely to develop a similar attitude. The student's previous teacher has input, and the child's social and emotional well-being is considered. If possible, the classroom should be balanced in regard to age, the number of students from each grade, racial and cultural diversity, ability level, and gender. The kids have to be able to handle it, work independently, and probably should have a certain degree of reading level; for example, I mean if the child is so low that they are one or two grade levels below in their reading, well, they're not functioning properly in a

> straight classroom, let alone in a combined grade that is so negative for the child and the teacher. The teachers do a professional job of placing the kids in the best learning environment. For me it was important to hear the discussions about the students coming to my combined grade. (Interview #1)

Alison interacted with her peers on a daily basis. She was well liked by everyone. She shared with colleagues and they shared with her. The teachers at the school did not work in isolation; they worked together and helped each other. She reflected:

> The teachers at this school are awesome and unbelievable with their giving and sharing, and I have taught at lots of schools. One teacher gives me a copy of all her material for the Grade Ones and I can decide what I want to use. I thought my first day went really well. It was partially because of a colleague. She gave me a lot of help, advice, and materials to use and just helped me out with what to expect even though I had taught a combined grade before. It is going to make my year much, much better than it ordinarily would be, but all the teachers here are like that. Oh, it is very nice; probably that is why I have stayed here so long. (Interview #1)

Her colleagues described Alison as self-assured, friendly, and very personable. This was important when teaching a combined grade, because she was in the somewhat unique position of having to coordinate with teachers at more than one grade level. Alison explained:

> For the Grade Ones, I can just make a trip to the kindergarten room and borrow some manipulatives for math if I need them. I don't even have to ask. I just leave a note to the teacher. I go on field trips with other teachers in the same grade. Some are for my whole class and some are just for Grade One or Grade Two. As well, we sometimes mingle our students together for special projects. When the field trip is just for one grade, I am lucky and grateful because either the principal will cover my class or the straight-grade teacher will take my students. (Interview #1)

From her statements above, it is obvious that Alison was very willing to work with other teachers, and they in turn enjoyed working with her. She realized that a combined grade must reflect more of a child-centred approach rather than a curriculum-centred approach. She said:

> It is not appropriate for a teacher in a combined grade to use just one curriculum, and it is an impossible task to teach two completely separate curricula. Therefore, I need to work closely with the other teachers, particularly the ones teaching the same grades as I am. We discuss the units we are teaching and the activities we are using. At this school we are very aware of what the other grades closest to us are doing. (Interview #6)

> Students at this school are not usually in a combined grade the next year, and the teachers do not want to hear kids saying, "We did that last year." (Interview #3)

Alison was an experienced teacher, and in our many casual conversations she stated that she thought her school was terrific. One of the main reasons for this belief was that the staff worked well together and was kind and generous to each other. In a collegial school, adults are constantly learning because everyone is a staff developer for everyone else.

Support of the Principal

In the district in which Alison worked, the principals made all of the crucial decisions for the school. The principal was responsible for how well the students performed and how well the school functioned. She made the final decisions about class size and classroom organization but believed that the staff should be involved and provide input into the decision and that everyone should get the chance to be a leader. Alison reported that her principal developed three somewhat different scenarios of how the classrooms could be organized. The teachers worked together and decided which scenario would best meet their needs and the students' needs. They were asked to keep in mind that student achievement was the top priority in the school. Alison said that the conversations were very interesting. It was not an easy job to achieve agreement.

> We all sat down together at the beginning. We found out that this would not work; too many ideas, and not everyone had the opportunity to talk. We divided into teams of two or three and discussed the possibilities. No teachers at that point had been assigned their class, but, of course, the teachers that had taught the same grade for a number of years assumed that they would be still teaching that grade. One of the effects of this activity was, it made me realize how difficult it was to organize three hundred students into classrooms, and there was no perfect way. In the end when we all came together again it was amazing. We had almost all picked the same scenario. (Interview # 3)

Teachers were then asked to request the grade or grades that they would like to teach. Alison decided that she would teach the combined Grade 1 and 2. The principal played a key role in creating this supportive school culture. When Alison was asked what she needed from her principal to help and support her with the combined grade, she said:

> I want my principal to provide opportunities for me to learn more about teaching a combined grade. I also want her to come into my classroom and see what is going on and provide feedback and suggestions for improvement. It is really important to me that the principal support the combined grade with parents. This year she sent out information about the research that had been done on combined grades. Parents have commented to me that they really enjoyed reading the articles by Siler & Hayden (1989) and Jayne Freeman (1984). It has helped them understand the benefits of a combined grade. (Interview # 8)

A particular factor that seemed to encourage Alison was that her principal felt it was important to support the combined grade. She spoke with Alison privately and said that she was willing to hire substitutes to enable her to attend workshops and plan changes with her colleagues. She also provided Alison with a little more planning time. I talked with the principal and found that she had used some creative timetabling to do this. Alison expressed her pleasure with this support:

> The principal is great. She really understands. I have taught combined grades in other schools, and usually the principal just says, "You have to work it out yourself; squeeze it all in somehow." This is not a good option. I already put in lots of my own time, but I still have my family to consider. (Interview # 5)

It is quite likely that one reason that Alison enjoyed such freedom and support from her principal was that her easy-going personality and tolerance made her well liked and trusted by her colleagues.

Professional Development Opportunities

Alison's drive to improve her teaching skills was very strong. Hence, professional development was high on Alison's agenda. She may have been typical of experienced teachers to the extent that she sought ideas that were practical and easy to implement and integrate in her classroom. Professional activities that failed to meet this criterion, no matter who sponsored them, Alison deemed disappointing. Alison found that the inservice programs offered by her own school board best met her needs because of their variety and the fact that she could pick the ones that best met her professional needs. These were specifically sessions on integrating curriculum in science and other curricula and on teaching a combined grade. What Alison felt she needed to improve on related to areas of the curriculum that were difficult to integrate in a combined class. Staying current on what was expected of a combined-grade teacher was important to Alison.

The school was allowed to have two schoolwide professional days per year; they could also have other professional development days beyond that. The school had the authority to decide in what kinds of activities the whole staff should engage. They notified the parents six weeks in advance that the school would be closed on a certain day for professional development. Alison's school had an instruction focus on writing, and her professional-development days would be on writing. Alison felt that this would really help in her in the combined grade:

> Writing is difficult, particularly with a Grade One and Grade Two combined. There is a huge difference in the ability demonstrated by the Grade Twos in writing and the Grade Ones, especially for the first three months. I was pleased that we would have help in the writing area. Our first professional development day was early in October and, when I found out who our speaker was, I emailed her and requested some time spent on writing in a combined grade. Now, I knew that there was only one other combined grade in the school, but in reality all the classes have a wide range of abilities in the class. I thought it could help everyone. She gave me lots of activities for my students and some very specific strategies I could use right away. It was great. (Interview #3)

When asked in what other kinds of professional development she participated, Alison replied:

> I went to the combined-grade inservices at the beginning of the year. They were good. What helped the most was the opportunity to talk with teachers who were teaching the same combined grade. We sort of set up an informal group, and we email each other occasionally just to talk about what we are doing. It is very comforting to know that what you are doing is sort of the same as everybody else and that some of my ideas were different than others' and the other teachers wanted to use them. (Interview #3)

As I watched Alison in the classroom I saw that she had many different organizational strategies such as boxes of independent activities for a variety of grade levels, special decorated areas for finished work, and of course her use of the binders.

Much of Alison's discipline policy and management strategies were based on the *Safe & Caring Schools* program, which was designed by the Alberta Teachers' Association. It provides a complete teacher's guide for each grade level. It was written to help students become more caring and to help them learn how to be safe. The *Safe & Caring Schools* program was a whole-school initiative at Alison's school. Bulletin boards, posters, and incentives for good behavior were visible through the hallways and display cases. The program was aligned with the current Alberta Learning health curriculum. This program was in its second year at the school and specifically focused on values and behaviors that promote kindness and respect for others and their property. She spoke highly of the program:

> In the *Safe &Caring Schools* initiative students are rewarded with a card called a Niska card. Each month the students with a certain number of cards are recognized for their goodness at a whole-school assembly, and they have a brown-bag lunch with the principal. I have always promoted the same values in my classroom, so this program just adds to what I already do, but the kids think it is more important because all the kids are doing it. The strength of the program is that the kids are now using the same language to describe behaviors and consequences. In all the classes we are teaching kids how to work together as a team. In a combined grade it is even more important because you have two defined grade levels, and sometimes the kids do not want to play with the younger ones or they pick on them. (Interview #4)

Chapter Summary

This chapter included information from the interviews with the teacher. The average amount of time spent interviewing was about 18 half days. All of the interviews were enjoyable, interesting, and informative. The teacher generated questions that provided additional research information and provided additional information to many of the questions. This chapter described from the teacher's perspective her types of planning, and the factors that influenced planning in a combined grade classroom.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

This chapter discusses the connections between the literature, the research questions, and the findings from the study. To begin, there is a brief summary of the design and purpose of the study. Following this, the chapter summarizes the teacher's, beliefs about teaching and learning, teaching practices, challenges and concerns, useful assistance, philosophy of education, implementation of curricula, individualization and assessment.

Summary of the Case Study

This study was designed to describe and explain how one teacher thought and planned in a combined grade classroom. The purpose of the study was to contribute to understanding the organization of combined-grade classrooms. An increased awareness of how a teacher plans and manages a combined grade could provide a basis for considering change or improvements to the teaching of combined classes or the organization of combined grades. The intent was not to prove theory or predict behavior; rather, it was to enhance understanding. In order to provide descriptive data on teacher planning from the classroom teacher's perspective, it was appropriate to conduct a case study using observations and interviews. To be able to document the processes that the teacher demonstrated in a combined class, I placed myself in the teacher's environment, observed her from as many vantage points as possible, and interviewed her regularly. In this research report I have made an effort to enable my readers to see and understand the teacher's planning and thinking in a combined grade.

This study was undertaken to address a gap in the current research on combined grades. This gap was discovered as a result of investigating the research on combined grade classrooms. This literature addressed student achievement, student affective development, and teacher, administrator, and parent beliefs, but not teacher planning. There appeared to be few studies in which the researcher observed the teacher in a combined classroom or studied teacher planning in a combined grade. The professional literature pertaining to combined grades suggested that teaching strategies and student needs in a combined grade varied from those in a single grade. The researcher wanted to know how teacher planning was altered when the teacher worked in a combined grade.

Eight related questions helped to guide the study. The discussions related to these questions are contained in this section. They were drawn from an examination of a case study of an experienced teacher in a combined grade class. The information gathered was not generalizable beyond the specific classroom or beyond the time at which this investigation took place. However, a number of the experiences and feelings that the teacher described may resonate with educators who are examining their own practice; it may support and affirm the work of combined grade teachers and foster professional pride in teaching a combined grade.

What are the beliefs about teaching and learning of an experienced combined-grade teacher?

Consistent with the research on teacher beliefs, the teacher recognized and accepted that teaching a combined grade was complex and involved harder work than teaching a single grade. It required more preparation time, particularly at the beginning of the year, and a larger repertoire of instructional methods and materials. Few resources to support combined-grade teaching were available, and most resources for the single grades were usually unresponsive to the integration of two curricula found in a combined class. In addition to managing two curricula, the teacher had to deal with the negative perception of combined-class teaching. However, the teacher believed that the benefits of learning for the students outweighed the barriers of implementation.

Consistent with the work of Chace (1961) and McClellan and Kinsey (1997) was the teacher's belief that a combined class is often emotionally and socially healthier for students because the combined class handles the diversity of students successfully. The teacher supported the idea that developing positive classroom relationships was an important way in a combined class to contribute to an education for life in society and for citizenship. She believed that combined classes could be places where children learned a great deal about relating to others and understanding themselves. Learning about classroom relationships occurred in her combined classroom in all subjects; she looked at the activities for content learning and altered or added to them to contribute to a sense of community in the classroom.

The teacher believed that knowledge of curricular expectations and availability of the necessary resources promoted student learning in a combined grade. The teacher, within the limitations placed on her by the provincial curriculum, made curriculum decisions for her students. She developed the students' grade-level curriculum according to the needs of the children in the class; however, in a combined-grade class she integrated the curricula to a greater extent. She appeared to have an excellent understanding of three or four grade-level curricula and was constantly checking and rechecking the Program of Studies, which was usually open on her desk, to ensure that the needs of each grade level and student were met.

Choosing and planning the use of materials for activities required more time and thought for the teacher. She planned student activities that had clear, specific instructions, used a format that the students had practiced, and reviewed material that had been addressed in class. Thematic planning helped the teacher to focus the activities. The materials in each subject related to the theme were organized according to the outcomes and expectations she planned to teach, and differentiated for the two grade levels. Individual needs were met by changing the parameters of the activity.

She believed that her knowledge of different learning strategies enhanced classroom management in a combined grade. The classroom was crowded with learning centres and individual activities. However, she acknowledged she did more photocopying of student work pages and her own material for students than in a single grade because there were no recommended resources for a combined class, and she revised most materials that she had selected from a number of resources. One-on-one time with students was provided during the time that students were working in centres or on individual activities.

The teacher believed that she should adopt an inclusive, team-based approach to teaching and learning in a combined-grade setting. Students were regularly taught as one group. The teacher believed that direct instruction was an effective strategy in a combined grade that encouraged the children to share ideas. Whole-class discussion after the lesson gave the children time to think through the implications of what was taught. While she was teaching she was also balancing the pace of the lesson, the time allotted for activities, and the deadlines for finished work. She also realized that her explanations were not always clearly understood by all of her students, but that small-group work or individual teaching would address this matter. It was difficult to see the differentiation in activities in her classroom. The heterogeneous arrangement of students into groups was easily identified, but it was not easy to detect two clearly defined grade levels of students working in her classroom.

The teacher found that cooperative learning strategies tended to benefit student achievement in her combined grade. Her students were encouraged to help each other, exchange ideas, and participate in sharing their ideas with the entire class. She felt that when they were in small, mixed-ability groups, the higher-ability students in effect served as teachers for the students who needed clarification or help. She believed that the success of her cooperative learning groups was dependent upon the class atmosphere, the way she structured the ability levels, and the personalities of the students.

The provincial programs of study and assessment requirements often influenced the thinking of the teacher. They provided strong motivation to address the 'core curricula' for each grade, and the certainty of standardized examination at the year's end doubtless added to the motivation, if only to avoid placing her students at a disadvantage in terms of missed content. Nevertheless, differentiating the curriculum to meet student needs was an essential component of her combined grade and received considerable emphasis. The teacher recognized that teaching must focus on skills, concepts, processes, and attitudes rather than on memorized facts. With the rapid increase in knowledge due to advanced science and technology, it was more suitable to learn how to learn, to evaluate and judge, to transfer and apply knowledge, to understand processes, and to know how to access information when needed.

By and large, the teacher felt that she was not tied to one curriculum and was able to do activities that she would probably not do in a single grade because the necessity for integration of two curricula required more creative strategies and planning. For example, science was taught for the first six weeks in large blocks of time, and social studies was taught in the following six weeks. This timetable reorganization allowed students to focus their thoughts exclusively on the concepts and skills needed in one area.

The teacher explained that it was often positive for students to have a repetition of curriculum content, which sometimes happened in a combined grade; however, the types of activities were changed or extension activities were provided. There was also a difference in her expectations of the quality of the work that the student produced.

The teacher recognized that students in her combined class did more marking and evaluating of their work than did students in a single grade. She believed that it was valuable review time. She designed ways for students to edit and assess their work, and her instructional strategies were shared with the students. Her classroom had clear rules and routines that made such shared responsibility productive.

This combined class was a busy place. Although the class had a full schedule, the teacher always made time for those unplanned teachable moments when stopping everything for a good discussion was the best thing to do.

What are the practices of the combined-grade teacher? Are they different from those used by a teacher when she teaches a single grade?

The combined-grade teacher believed that her practices were not very different from those that she had used in a single grade. Her instructional strategies, the amount of time spent on outcomes and expectations for both grades, and the frequency of her use of some practices was different.

She spent more time in September on rules, expectations, class climate, and building a sense of community in a combined grade than she would have in a single grade. Students at this time saw themselves as two different grade groupings in one class. The teacher developed specific activities to bring students together as a team. As time went on she noticed that students were working more as a team and that this cooperation extended even beyond the classroom to include recesses and lunch hour.

The teacher had a crucial role in establishing a climate in her classroom that promoted and developed independence. This was more important in a combined-grade than in a single-grade classroom because students at one grade level needed to be able to work independently while the teacher was instructing or working with students at another grade level.

The organizational strategies for instruction had to be more thought out because they were more complex in the combined grade than in the single grade. The teacher often used creative ways to organize materials, learning, and students. For example, every day in the first 30 minutes of class the students read books of their choice from the teacher's classroom library in reading groups. Grade 6 students read with students who needed assistance with reading, the students in the upper grade of the combined grade read with good readers in the younger grades, one child went to the school office to read with the principal, and the teacher read with a group of children. The teacher's students were meaningfully engaged in reading every day. Each week a chart indicated the students' reading group. This organizational work allowed her time to meet with all the children and track their reading skills.

The teacher focused more on individual instruction in a combined grade than she did in a single grade. There were students within each grade-level group who were lower in ability and needed extra help, and there were students who were higher in ability who needed extensions to the work they were doing. The plans that were made and the decisions that were implemented reflected the teacher's student-centred outlook.

The teacher's whole-class instruction revolved more around open-task activities in her combined grade than they would have in a single grade. For example, during a brainstorming activity a writing assignment about Halloween was introduced. Students from both grade levels discussed it from different perspectives. The more advanced students helped the younger students with higher thinking skills, and the younger students often contributed fresh ideas.

The teacher specifically taught the students about the challenges and rewards of being in a combined grade. It was more important to students in a combined grade than in a single grade that they be informed and knowledgeable about their classroom organization. Sometimes being in a combined situation was quite confusing for younger students. The teacher helped by putting a daily agenda on the blackboard every day and by providing information on signs and charts placed around the classroom about where they could access their books and their assignments. The teacher also kept all the students' supplies and books organized into grade levels and easily accessible to them.

The teacher endorsed the importance of field trips in her combined grade but choosing a field trip was challenging. She had to consider the cost to parents and her class budget when choosing an experience that would meet the curriculum outcomes of both grades. The teacher had to consider whether the field trip had been or would be done by the students when they were in a single grade.

The teacher in the combined grade displayed more charts, lists of words, pictures, and children's work on the walls than she did in a single grade. The classroom identified that there were two grade levels. For example, the science outcomes from the Program of Studies for Grade One and Grade Two were displayed.

What challenges and concerns did this teacher face in a combined grade?

When asked about the challenges and concerns in a combined grade, the teacher wanted first to say that there were as many rewards to teaching combined grades as there were in single grades, but that there were more challenges and concerns in a combined classroom.

A significant logistical concern was planning. The combined class required a considerable amount of planning by the teacher. She felt that many teachers she knew taught combined grades without sufficient forethought and planning. The participation of students, parents, colleagues, and administrators needed to be adjusted when there was a change from a single grade to a combined grade.

Staffing and placing students in combined grades was another concern in some schools. The teacher explained that in her school, most teachers did not want to teach a combined grade, and the principal had to encourage a teacher or assign the class to a teacher, and that sometimes created a difficult situation. This was consistent with the findings in studies done by Brown and Martin (1989) and Marzolf (1978). As well, other teachers could be resentful if they felt that the combined class received the brighter, quieter, and better-behaved students.

Instruction, classroom organization, and classroom management in a combined grade were multifaceted and demanding. Covering two curricula in only one year was paramount in her thinking every day. She closely monitored the time spent on each outcome and expectation. I observed a great deal of creativity and flexibility in her planning and organization. The teacher had to be well prepared for the day because demands on her teaching time required well-developed organizational skills and exemplary management skills.

Assessment was a concern. The teacher was accountable for different levels of assessment in a combined grade. It was critical that planning be centred on learner outcomes for both grade levels. Continuing to use activities that were successful with a single-grade class was possible only if the objectives of the activity as defined in the Alberta Program of Studies were directly linked to the curriculum outcomes of both grade levels. The teacher believed that she was more likely to address the expectations for both grades if she used the curriculum documents frequently.

What did this teacher identify as useful assistance when teaching a combined grade?

The teacher recognized that she needed more assistance in a combined grade than she did in a single grade. Her principal also needed to be aware of the complexities and the requirements of a combined-grade teacher and needed to be willing to give support for the needs she identified.

The teacher believed that a combined grade requires more time for planning and program preparation. She suggested that combined grade teachers should be given extra time to do their planning or have available some teacher-assistant time for part of the day if the school budget allowed for this expenditure. Planning time for combined-grade teachers should be coordinated with teachers in the same grade to enable discussion of learning strategies and activities on which they could work collaboratively.

The teacher explained that it would assist a combined-grade teacher to have a team of teachers involved in the learning of her students. She needed assistance with teaching the science curriculum, with the Grade One students writing at the beginning of the year, with sending one grade on specific field trips, and with specific student-learner needs during the year. She suggested that in science the students be separated and taught by another teacher for at least some of the units that were grade-level specific, and that in writing the Grade One students practice in the single Grade One classroom during their writing time. The writing assistance would not generalize to other combined grades because it applied only to Grade One students. Teachers of the same grades took her students on specific grade-level field trips, they also reviewed the work of individual students who were having difficulties with a specific skill or had been absent.

This teacher indicated that all combined-grade teachers needed assistance from both their colleagues and administration in helping promote the positive aspects of combined grades. Often other teachers say, “I am so lucky to have a single grade this year” or say to a parent whose child may have had difficulties in the previous year in a combined situation, "The student will be fine this year because he/she is in a single grade." An atmosphere of mutual respect and support was desirable and appreciated. She suggested that the administrator might support combined grades by having the school newsletter each month include an article featuring combined-grades achievements and successes.

What was this teacher's philosophy of education?

In this study the term *philosophy of education* refers to a particular direction that determines the teacher's unique view of what is good and what is important in the field of education. It guides students, teachers, and schools in both teaching and learning and is integral in everyday classroom practice. The teacher expressed a balanced philosophy of education. She believed in building a classroom atmosphere that values imagination and creativity, working to develop student's differences and potentials, working to motivate students to want to learn and like school, striving to make students feel successful, and valuing student thinking.

At the end of every day the teacher took a few minutes and spoke with each child, reminding him/her specifically of one thing that he/she had done well or improved that day. Her warm, caring attitude and her humor with each and every student exemplified her beliefs about classroom atmosphere and motivating students to learn to enjoy school.

> Students were asked what was important to them about teachers, students spoke of good teachers as mentors, where a mentor had the capacity to bring out the best in another person. Relationships with teachers subsequently become one of the most important factors in children's learning, knowing that they have met someone who can take an interest in having a discussion, in bringing out and extending their ideas in making them feel valued. (Cullingford, 1995, p. 159)

How did this teacher plan for implementing the mandated curricula?

The teacher explained that in teaching a combined grade, more planning and organization are needed than in a single grade. She suggested combined-grade teachers needed to begin planning in the summer as she did. She took home the combined-grade manual (a resource recently developed by her school district) for the grades she was going to teach so that she could read during July. The resource provided some new strategies to use with students. In mid August she worked on her long-range plans and her short-range plans, always focusing on the connections between the two curricula. For example, she first lined up the social studies topics and found where she could combine her units. The social studies curriculum was more aligned for two grades than the science curriculum was. In language arts she planned her themes for the year around both the social studies topics and the science units.

She focused on the checklists of each grade level by subject from both Edmonton Public Schools, *Combined Grade Manual*, (Colvin-Macdormand, Hartson, & Wright, 1999), and the *Planning for Success* (Thomas, 1998), document. Consultants in the resource development area in her district had written these two teacher resources. The checklists for each grade level and subject were placed side by side in her binder. The differences in expectations for each grade were then clearer and easier for her. The checklists were used regularly, and she checked off the ones that she had addressed. As she was monitoring her teaching, she sometimes noticed that she had omitted or forgotten to teach a concept. She would plan a time to include this concept. She periodically went through the Grade One and Grade Two outcomes and expectations.

She often reviewed her long-range plans. She wanted to make sure that she was teaching at the right pace. If she spent too much time on one area, she needed to move along a little faster. In contrast to the study by Reiser (1994), whose results indicated that during combined-grade teaching there was less deviation from unit and daily plans than from yearly plans, the teacher changed her daily plans more often than she did her long-range plans. This depended on the needs of the students. If the students understood the concepts, she went forward with the learning; and if the concepts were difficult, she would spend more time on activities and review. She valued all the organization and planning that was done in preparation for teaching a combined grade, because she believed that it improved her teaching and that every teacher should plan this way.

How were the individual students' needs being met?

During the first month the teacher felt that her most important work was to find specific information about each of her students' academic and emotional needs. Trusty and Beckenstein (1996) recognized that combined-grade teachers must know their students' abilities and differences very well. The teacher observed the students, took anecdotal notes, discussed student's abilities and personalities with their former teachers if they had been in the school the year before, and read the cumulative files of students new to the school in her class. She did a simple spelling test as a whole group and then did a reading inventory individually with each student. The information gathered helped her understand the social, emotional, and academic needs of her students quickly and enabled her to begin to address their individual needs.

The teacher expressed the viewpoint that most teachers felt that a combined grade was more challenging because of their perceptions that there was a larger difference in the abilities of students in two grade levels. As an experienced combined-grade teacher, she explained that it was challenging to be accountable for two curricula, but the range of abilities was often not much different than in a single grade. This year she had students working four grade levels above their grade level and students working at least one grade behind. In a combined-grade class she met the individual student needs by grouping them by ability, forgetting about their grade levels and focusing on their curriculum needs. Her activities were open ended, and she had many extension or review activities for the students to engage in when they were finished their work. She spent individual time helping students during instructional time, at recess, or at lunchtime. She also had volunteers in her classroom to help individual students. This, of course, took extra time because she had a file prepared for the volunteers with different activities for each of the students with whom the volunteers were working that would help reinforce the concepts they did not understand. This teacher's work is consistent with the literature on exemplary teachers. "One characteristic of an exemplary teacher is that the teacher possesses a broad repertoire of techniques and is able to skillfully use these techniques to meet the changing demands of the classroom" (Pressley et al., 1998, p. 22).

How was learning being assessed?

The teacher knew how to accurately assess and evaluate students' work, while at the same time keeping students actively involved in their learning, which she believed was the key to differentiating instruction in a combined-grade setting. She suggested that perhaps the best assessments have no clear-cut answers and, although no single assessment technique works optimally in all situations, the best ones focus on stimulating student thought processes, not on producing a fixed response.

The teacher used a variety of assessment methods that provided her with snapshots of the students' growth. She wrote anecdotal notes, kept samples of the students' work, and monitored the results of quizzes and subject tests. Products such as poems, stories, paintings, journals, math problems that encouraged creative thinking, group work, and collaborative problem-solving activities provided information about her students' progress. Her students' work was evaluated against the curriculum expectations. She liked to look at or mark everything that her students had completed during the day. She believed that she needed to stay 'on top of the activities' that students were doing.

The teacher generated two sets of report card comments, specific Grade 1 comments and specific Grade 2 comments. She believed that it was absolutely critical to demonstrate to her administrator, the students, and the parents where the students were in their learning at their grade level.

Chapter Summary

The eight research questions helped the researcher further understand the complexity and effect of planning in a combined grade teaching. Teaching a combined grade was complex and challenging. It required the teacher to understand the curriculum expectations and outcomes for two grade levels. A positive classroom environment, cooperative learning strategies, and individualization were classroom practices that were valued in the combined-grade classroom. Planning, staffing and classroom activities were a concern when organizing a combined-grade classroom. The teacher in the combined-grade class needed more time for preparation and more assistance and support from colleagues. The teacher believed that all children should have the opportunity to learn in her classroom. She used assessments, more frequently than in a single grade, to help her identify the student's needs and implement the curriculum.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Two major conclusions related to teacher planning in a combined-grade classroom were supported by evidence in this study. Neither of the conclusions is new; however, the evidence provided from the case study may help to explain more fully the importance of teacher planning in a combined-grade classroom and the importance of teacher selection for combined-grade teaching.

Teacher planning in a combined grade differs from teacher planning in a single grade in three areas: curriculum and instruction, management of learning activities and classroom discipline. Teacher selection for combined-grade teaching should consider the qualities, knowledge of curricula, organizational skills, knowledge of instruction, and personal qualities such as energy, and a desire to be challenged that appear to be important to successful combined-grade teaching.

Curriculum and Instruction

All teachers face the problem of deciding how to present curricula and what activities to plan for students. Combined-grade teachers must resolve this challenge differently than single-grade teachers because the teachers of a combined grade have greater demands placed on them by the two grade levels they teach. Planning in combined-grade classrooms requires a great deal more detail and explicitness regarding the number of specific objectives, the integration of activities and the differentiation of assessment. It is a complex job deciding what needs to be taught for two grade levels and deciding which strategy would effectively help the students. Combined-grade teachers have to make choices about which lessons they will present to the whole class and which lessons will have to be taught separately Combined-grade teachers often have to prepare two lessons, incorporating activities that each group of students can work on without supervision for some time during the lesson. In addition, units in social studies and other content areas are planned carefully in coordination with other teachers at the same grade levels or next grade levels in order to provide the requirements of the curriculum for the students.

Combined-grade classes are most common in elementary schools. In many combined-grade classes students do relatively the same kind of work, but the objectives and some activities differ for each level. In an elementary class, particularly with very young children, there is a significant difference between the skills and vocabulary of the two grade levels. These differences make working as one group challenging: either the work is too easy for one or it is too hard for the other. In addition there are very few commercially available resources designed for this approach; therefore, the teachers have to plan and organize the curricula and resources without much assistance.

One of the solutions to organizing two grade level outcomes and expectations is to plan a theme-based approach. This is an excellent approach in a combined-grade as it provides continuity of instruction for both grades and eases the confusion for the students. Using a theme-based approach, the same experience may sometimes be presented to all; what each child learns from that experience depends on his or her grade level of development and background of experiences.

Students can be very helpful to each other in explaining assignments or informally helping each other with the work. However, the students cannot teach the curriculum. To involve students in helping other students takes more teacher planning time. Students need to be taught how to effectively help another student and in spite of careful planning, questions always arise that cannot be answered by the helping student. These more able students also need time to do their own work that they cannot do if they are responsible for a less able student.

The combined grade teacher's plans need to include ways to adapt or revise the curricula to fit both grade levels as well as each individual child. Planning time is at least doubled and is much more complex than for a single grade.

Management of Learning Activities

The combined-grade teacher needs to plan for letting the students know what their activities should be and what is expected of them. Whatever form the plan takes it should state objectives, describe activities, and outline assessment strategies.

The directions to students should be clear enough that the students do not interrupt the teacher with routine affairs. When class time is divided, every minute is precious to the teacher and to the students who are sharing the time at that moment. The teacher should make every effort to eliminate interruptions by making class routines as clear as possible.

With students working on their own for some class time, a teacher does not have the same opportunity to informally evaluate that a single grade classroom teacher does. More frequent assessment and a more careful checking of the written work is necessary. There must be some way to assess students' performance on the non-written work they do without teacher supervision, whether by oral discussion or by a point system for activities completed.

Daily plans for classroom activities in a combined-grade class should be simply and clearly explained to the students. It is important to reduce any confusion that would arise and in a combined grade confusion sometimes seems to multiply.

Some students feel less accountable in a combined class, probably because they are so accustomed to working under direct supervision all the time. When they lose that supervision, the younger students especially, they may flounder for a while until they learn to use their time better.

The kinds of activities that are more manageable in a combined grade are those that involve reading, writing, and filling in answers on student sheets. However, active work is needed to keep motivation high and to give students the oral practice they need. Students can play games, do listening comprehension exercises from a tape recording and prepare dramatizations of their own reading or writing. Many game type activities also require language use, from simple card games that teach vocabulary, to activities in which students are required to solve a problem by pooling their information. Thoughtful planning is required for group activities.

Cooperative learning activities and other group activities should be implemented in a combined-grade classroom. When students work in small groups they make more noise than when only one person at a time is talking. The noise level can affect the teacher, the students, and the teachers and classes next door. Understanding by administration and colleagues is necessary, and careful planning for the location of a combined-grade classroom is needed.

Classroom Discipline

The classroom atmosphere in a combined-grade classroom is often more relaxed and noisy than a single grade because of the increased use of group activities that increases communication at all levels. Students may not be in the same desks all the time, and, in fact, desk arrangements may be changed frequently. Students may walk around the room and talk with each other.

Conventional methods of dealing with students leaving the class, such as passes or asking the teacher, are not as effective in a combined grade class because of the special need at times not to interrupt the teacher who is working with a group of students. Students not working with the teacher may want to leave the classroom more frequently than those in single classrooms. The reason for this may be that the students sometimes perceive the time away from the teacher as their time and they are responsible for making decisions about how to use it. Sometimes students may feel frustrated when the teacher is not available to answer their questions.

Teachers can plan ahead for these obstacles. They can respond enthusiastically to their students and their work. They can congratulate them on their perseverance and provide public opportunities for the students to demonstrate their work. Planning small group work can offer tremendous variety in activities, planning active involvement in the lessons can increase children's curiosity and stimulate their interest. The children will then remain motivated and interested in the learning for an extended period of time. As well, establishing routines for times when students need to leave the classroom or have completed their work is necessary in a combined-grade. For example, quietly writing their names on the blackboard one at a time when they need to leave the classroom, and providing additional activities in the classroom for students who have finished their assignments early promotes positive student behavior.

Teacher Selection

Combined-grade teachers need to be experienced exemplary teachers. They need to have knowledge and comfort with integrating the skills and the content of the two grade level curricula with a more diverse group of students. Teachers should have experience and knowledge of curriculum with one of the grades of the combined-grade. The combined-grade teachers need to be more organized than single grade teachers as there is more curricula, several activities going on at once, and students working at many different levels. A combined-grade takes more teacher time than a single grade. While there may be fewer students, there is more time spent marking as students may turn in more written work and evaluation may be more frequent.

The teacher should be able to function as, a director of learning, a diagnostician and a consultant to each child. The teacher should be able to assess learning, have a solid grasp of students' strengths and weaknesses, both collectively and individually, their personalities and their needs and interests in order to make decisions regarding evaluation, pacing, and teaching strategies of the appropriate nature. The teacher should have knowledge regarding learning centers, learning strategies and assessment practices.

The teacher should have a positive attitude towards combined-grade classes and have a firm understanding of the combined-grade research. Negative attitudes towards combined grades are not uncommon with parents, teachers, and principals but can be overcome by explanations of the educational rationale and benefits from combining grades. Not all teachers can handle a combined class effectively. Some do not like the informal atmosphere, keeping track of so many different activities or catering to so many individual differences.

The combined-grade teachers should have lots of energy, and a desire to be challenged. Teachers in combined-grades have little time during class to plan or pause for a moment at their desks. They use their breaks to organize materials for the students when they return to class. Combined-grade teachers are continually busy teaching and assisting students with activities. Teachers experienced with single grades and teachers who regularly attended professional development sessions are more likely to succeed and feel comfortable with a combined grade.

A beginning teacher will have tremendous difficulty with a combined-grade classroom. An experienced teacher will simply know answers to questions because the questions have come up before in the normal course of teaching while the new teacher may have to put off many questions until the next day. This may discourage students. It takes experience to recognize what groups are capable of, what lessons students can teach themselves, and what goals are reasonable for students at a particular grade level.

Questions and Recommendations for Practice

The conclusions presented in the previous section should be treated with caution because the evidence on which they are based is subject to two limitations. First, the case study involved only one combined-grade teacher and only one combined-grade class; and second, it is limited by the extent to which the teacher could provide insights about what she did in her combined grade. However, it is possible to raise some questions and to suggest some implications for the world of the combined-grade teacher for curriculum developers, teacher educators, subject consultants, and educational administrators.

School-based personnel who are considering organizing combined grades in their school should ask questions about the purpose of and preparation for implementing a combined-grade class. Are its advantages understood? Are its disadvantages understood? Is there expertise on staff, or will someone have to be trained? How will students be selected for the combined grade? What special assistance can be made available to teachers?

Issues arising from the case study pointed to areas for improvement of practice. The purposes of the combined grade in this teacher's school were to organize the classes into an equal size. The administration should prepare current information regarding combined-grade teaching and student learning in a combined grade, for the staff, the students, and the parents of the combined-grade class. There was little information about the advantages and disadvantages of a combined grade beyond the teacher's thoughts and feelings about combined grades or what she had heard from other teachers. She was asked by the school administration to teach the class because she had previous experience in teaching a combined grade. She had no formal training in teaching combined grades. She credited her growth in the area of teaching a combined grade to her past experiences with single grades. The students were chosen carefully for the combined grade to meet the needs of students who were high achievers as well as the needs of the students who needed review of some areas of the curriculum. All previous teachers of these students were involved.

At the present time the school district has prepared *Combined Grade Manuals* (Colvin-Macdormand et, al., 1999) for teachers which contain many activities for different subjects, but there is little inservicing on the process of teaching in a combined grade. Because this administrator's knowledge about combined grades was limited and the budget for classrooms was small, the issue of special assistance was not addressed.

Recommendations for Teachers and Administrators

Teachers should realize and accept that many elementary teachers may have to face teaching a combined class throughout their careers. School populations can easily change as the community changes. If the choice is available, teachers need to carefully consider the commitment of time required to teach a combined grade before agreeing to accept the assignment. This could become a potentially serious problem or a burden for the teacher.

Teachers of combined grades should attend inservices, if available, on combined-grade teaching, visit other combined-grade classes, or talk with consultants or other experts in the area. They need to be aware of the research available on combined grades and observe demonstrations of teaching in a combined grade. The key idea is the need for professional development that would provide the knowledge and procedures about teaching a combined grade.

Teachers of combined grades should realize that combined grades operate with a major emphasis on individualized programming and integration. Teachers need to know that learning specific skills through integration of subjects, creating increased self-initiated and self-directed learning, and creating a cooperative, positive learning environment are particularly important in a combined grade. Learning through integration of subject areas, individualized programming, and self-directed learning would promote students' learning in all classrooms, but these approaches are particularly important in a combined-grade classroom. Teachers should also be aware that there are many social dynamics in a combined grade that affect student learning. In a combined-grade setting, getting along with others is crucial to the students' learning.

Administrators should recognize that previous teaching experience, a positive attitude toward combined grades, sound curriculum knowledge, and a wide repertoire of teaching strategies are all factors that need to be taken into consideration when assigning a teacher to a combined grade. This suggests that first-year teachers should not be assigned to teach a combined grade. Administrators should encourage combined grade teachers to have student teachers in their classrooms which would give the student teachers opportunities to practice combined-grade teaching in their practicum.

Both administrators and teachers need to be proactive and willing to work closely with the community and parents before a combined class is organized. They need to provide information based on the research for parents and also provide parents with opportunities to discuss their concerns. For students to succeed, parents need to be supportive of the combined-grade class.

Recommendations for District Personnel

For district personnel, the conclusions raise questions about whether the school district has the responsibility to prepare teachers for teaching combined grades. Central office consultants should develop a series of inservices for combined-grade teachers and provide/develop more resources like the *Combined Grade Manual* (Colvin-Macdormand et. al., 1999). This is of particular concern because at this time many experienced teachers are retiring, and new inexperienced teachers may be expected to teach combined grades. Teachers need to have access to information about combined grades that will increase their knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Recommendations for Further Research

There is still a need for more research and documentation on teaching a combined grade and one way this need can be satisfied is through classroom-observation studies. Additional thorough investigations of the way teachers teach in a combined classroom should be conducted. Studies involving novice teachers, secondary teachers, or teachers who have been forced to teach a combined grade would extend our knowledge of combined-grade teaching.

Finally, this study is not closed. Through conversations, personal observations, and readings, my interest in combined grades will remain. As well, many colleagues and parents have asked to read the dissertation as the topic of combined grades is pertinent and of personal interest. I will continue to think about combined grades and the teachers in those classrooms. I will share the information that I have learned from this research study during staff meetings, information meetings for parents, written publications, and at inservices related to the topic.

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APPENDIX A

FIRST INTERVIEW WITH THE TEACHER

First Interview with the Teacher

What do teachers do in a successful combined class?

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your training and experiences as a teacher. (Personal information shared, number of years teaching, university focus, what and where they have taught)

2. I am interested in knowing about your experience and interest in a combined grade. (Number of years, grades taught, preferences)

3. From your perspective what are the advantages or disadvantages in teaching a combined grade?

4. When you first knew you were teaching a combined grade what did you think? Were you excited or nervous or ambivalent?

5. Tell me about your present class. I know it is early in the year. What do you enjoy? Do you have any concerns about the class.? Do you have any stories to share?

6. What strategies do you use to determine each student's level of achievement in September?

7. How are students chosen for your classroom? (No choice, learning styles, ability)

8. Suppose it was my first day in your classroom. What would it be like?

9. What changes in teaching approaches have been necessary in this classroom?

10. Some people say that it is much harder to teach a combined grade. What would you say to them?

11. Suppose I have a concern about my child repeating curriculum material in your combined class. How would you respond to that concern?

12. Tell me about the other teachers in the school. Do you work together? What is your relationship with them like?

13. Tell me about the parents of your students? Are they supportive? What questions do they have? How do you inform parents about the ways their child will learn in your classroom? How can they help their children in your class?

14. If you had a choice of classes to teach would you remain in a combined grade?

APPENDIX B

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

Additional Questions

What elements of teacher planning contribute to a successful combined class?

1. Tell me about your planning (types of planning, reasons for planning).
2. What are your beliefs about teaching and learning in a combined grade?
3. How do you plan for implementing the curriculum for combined grades.?
4. What strategies do you use to organize the combined classroom for learning?
5. How do your plans reflect the needs of individual students?
6. How does your planning help you with students and parents?

APPENDIX C

THE RESEARCH CHRONOLOGY

Research Chronology

August 21, 2000	Informal meeting with the teacher before school started.
August 28, 2000	Informal meeting with the teacher before school started
September 5, 2000	Emailed and asked about her first day
September 11, 2000	Planned tentative schedule with the teacher
September 19, 2000 (P.M.)	First Observation –Science blocked all afternoon Interview
September 26, 2000 (P.M.)	Observation –Art, Language Arts Science Interview
October 3, 2000 (A.M.)	Observation –Language Arts, Physical Education Lunchtime routine, reviewed transcripts
October 12, 2000 (P.M.)	Observation- Physical Education, Music (teacher's prep. time) Health, Math, Interview
October 17, 2000 (A.M.)	Observation-Paired reading, Language Arts, Math, Physical Education, Interview
October 27, 2000 (A.M.)	Videotaping first stimulated recall session
November 2, 2000 (P.M.)	Observation-Language Arts, Math, Science Reviewed transcripts
November 8, 2000 (A.M.)	Observation-Language Arts, Math, Music, went out for recess, Interview
November 16, 2000 (A. M.)	Observation- Language Arts, Math, Writing Activity -Went to staff meeting
November 21, 2000 (A.M.)	Language Arts, Math, Art, Interview
December 1, 2000 (A.M.)	Videotaping second stimulated recall session
December 8, 2000 (P.M.)	Social studies, Health, Language Arts, Assembly in gym, Interview
December 11, 2000 (P.M.)	Social studies, Physical Education, Language Arts, Interview
December 18th, 2000 (all day)	All subjects – Interview, Last day in class

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE: A Case Study of Combined Grades

INVESTIGATOR: M. Caley, B.A.,P.D.A.D., Dip.Ed., M.Ed.
Student, Doctor of Education
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

This is to certify that I, ____________________ hereby agree to participate in this research project the purpose of which is to examine the complexities of the teacher's thinking and planning in a combined grade.

1. I consent to be interviewed by the investigator and to have the interviews taped. I understand that only the investigator and the staff researcher will hear the interview tapes. Anonymity will be maintained.
2. I consent to be observed by the investigator and to have notes taken. I understand that the notes will be shared only with the investigator and the staff researcher. Anonymity will be maintained.
3. I consent to provide documents to the investigator that will be reviewed only by the investigator and the staff researcher. Anonymity will be maintained.
4. I also understand that the results of this research will be used only in the following manner:
    - research thesis
    - presentations and written articles for other educators

I understand that I am free to decline to answer any specific questions during the interview, about the observation notes or documents. I understand my participation in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time.

I understand that I have the right to review the interview transcripts, observation notes and documents, the analysis of the interview, observations and analysis and to delete any information origination from me if I should wish.

____
(Signature of Participant)

June 30/00
(Date)

M. Caley
(Signature of Investigator)

APPENDIX E

INFORMATION LETTERS TO PARENTS OF CHILDREN IN THE COMBINED-GRADE CLASS

Information Letter to Parents of Children in the Combined Grade Class

Marie Caley, B.A., P.D.A.D., Grad. Dip., Ph.D. (candidate)
Faculty of Elementary Education
University of Alberta
451-1491

Dear Parents:

This letter is to inform you of the research study that is happening in your child's classroom. The purpose of this study is to examine, through a case study of one teacher, the complexities of the teacher's thinking and planning in a combined grade, and to increase understanding of the setting, as well as possible approaches and teaching possibilities that respond to the unique dynamics of teaching a combined grade. The teacher was chosen because the principal identified her as an exemplary teacher. I was extremely pleased that she volunteered to be the participant in this important work.

The data gathered during the study would be used in a doctoral dissertation and may be used in future publication of professional journals. As well, a copy of the final dissertation will be made available for your school.

The majority of the study will take place during the first four months of this school term. (Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.,). I will be observing the teacher in the classroom initially twice a week. I recognize that I will also be interacting with the children, as they are an integral part of the classroom. However, your children will not be part of my study. Pseudonyms will be used in the final dissertation and the name of your school will not be used. If you have any reservations or questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at your convenience.

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